



YESHAYAHU (SEVEK) KROTOSHINSKI

I WAS BORN IN
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Translated from Hebrew by Baruch Gefen

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CHILDHOOD IN ŁÓDŹ

I was born in Łódź, Poland, on 8 March, 1923. My father, Yehiel Eliash Krotoshinski, and my mother, Friedl (Frida) Levkovich, were married eight years earlier. Mom could not conceive during the first five years of their marriage and the Polish physicians determined she must have surgery and referred her to physicians in Vienna. My parents traveled there and my mother had the surgery (years later, in the Ghetto, she told me it was no easy operation, but she was a young woman, recovered, and all went well. My eldest sister Topcze (Terry) was born a year later. I was born next, and then came Guta and Haya'le. This, of course, made grandparents on both sides very happy because in those days, sterility brought great shame to families. We were economically sound. Dad had a wholesale business, selling leather for shoes and soles, that provided nicely

for our family and the family of his brother Heniek (Haim), who was also married and a father of two. Heniek was in sales while Dad focused on managing and expanding the business. We lived in Stary Rynek, a fine Jewish neighborhood, in an apartment with two large rooms and



My father, Yehiel Krotoshinski. RIP

another rather large half-room. A small room behind a curtain in the kitchen served as bedroom for our Polish maid Wiadzia. Dad died suddenly when I was only three. She never told us why he died. I guess she did not want to cause us pain. She usually kept her feelings to herself. We rarely saw her crying. Heniek did try to manage the business himself, but soon encountered difficulties, accrued debts, and had to close shop. We suffered economically. Our savings were all used up and Mom started pawning valuables. After a while, she

married a man named Yitzhak Kirschenblatt, who had a son and a daughter of his own. Then Mom and Yitzhak had a son, Shlamek, my beloved little brother.

Yitzhak's older son, Yehiel, survived and lives in Israel, in Kfar Malal. Mom and Yitzhak separated two years later and upon her request, Grandpa Leibush, who had been widowed recently, moved in with us, to our great joy. Our economic situation forced us to move to a smaller and cheaper apartment in Górny Rynek, a less prestigious neighborhood where most of the residents were Poles. There was no room there for Wiadzia and Mom, who could not pay her, had to let her go. Wiadzia cried, did not want to leave, and said she'd work for free, but Mom would not have it, and she left in tears. We were sorry to see her leave. She came from a small village outside Łódź and when she visited her parents, she sometimes took me with her. Her folks were simple farmers, but they were kind people who were always happy I came, and spoiled me.

Dad's sister was married to Leibush Zaks, also a leather dealer and owner of several rental apartments on Jews' street in Łódź. Uncle Leibush showed an interest in Mom's situation and suggested that she'd lease a



*My parents,
Yehiel & Frida Krotoshinski*

store in the new and fair commercial center on Górny Rynek. He recommended that she sell slippers and connected her with some shoemakers he knew. Mom rented a small shop there and travelled to town twice a week to buy the shoes. She would bring crates in the freezing and rainy winter as well as in the heat of summer, unloaded the merchandize alone, and came home late at night, never complaining. She made scarce living, but we were happy nonetheless. No one knew we were orphans. We were always smartly dressed. Grandpa devoted himself to taking Dad's place, and we all loved him very much. We were a warm and close family.

I was 10 when we moved to Górny Rynek, Topcze was 12, and we both went to a grammar school in our new neighborhood.

I was in 4th grade. My teacher, Mrs. Amsterdam, lived on our street in one of the tall and fancy buildings known as Zupi. She would sometimes ask me to walk her home after school and let me carry notebooks of pupils she wanted to examine. I did it gladly and was proud that she chose me to help her. She often asked me in, gave me cookies, and played the piano for me.



The Bnei (sons of) Zion Choir in Łódź led by the conductor and composer, Mr. Levitin. 1934. I am in the center, bottom row.

I was happy in that school and felt that everyone was kind to me. Our non-Jewish singing teacher noticed that I had a good voice and would call me, “*zinger*, come here,” When a student named Zinger (singer in Yiddish) approached him, he would say: “Not you.

Krotoshinski!” and took me with him to sing with other classes.

I loved singing and sang in synagogue (*schul*) when I was very young, sometimes even solo. My classmates would come to *schul* to “listen to Shayek” and Mom came too, mainly on holidays. The cantor and the other men there realized I was an orphan because I would show up without a father, but not all the women knew us. When I sang, they were besides themselves with pleasure and asked, “Who is this boy who sings so pretty? Who is his mother?” and Mom only wiped her tears and said nothing.

David Ligorsky, a classmate, was also a fellow singer at *schul*. He came from a famous family of Górny Rynek butchers and his dad was the synagogue manager (*gabai*). He had three brothers and a sister. One day he told me, “My mother is inviting you over for cholent after *schul*.” Mom gave me permission and I went.

I’ll never forget that visit. Mom used to light Shabbat candles in pretty and tall candleholders, and Grandpa said the *Kiddush* and blessed the children, but it was nothing like what I saw at the Ligorskis. Their house

was clamorous. His big brothers made a huge racket, as happy boys do, while Mrs. Ligorsky and her daughter Feigele were busy in the kitchen. When the father came in, everyone hushed down at once, gathered around the table, and respectfully listened to his Kiddush. Then, we sat at the table and the mother and daughter served the food. We were all quiet through dinner and everyone ate very politely, all out of respect for the patriarch. I was very impressed.

In 1935, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, head of the military dictatorship that ruled Poland, died. Everyone mourned him deeply, including the Jews, because he did a lot for their equal rights. In school, our teacher wrote a poem in the Marshal's memory on the blackboard. When he started teaching us the tune, he saw that I picked it up at once, so he gave me the baton to direct the class choir. I rejoiced.

Only Hela Helmar survived of my classmates from Łódź. She was an intelligent, blond and pretty girl from a wealthy and respectable six-member family. They all perished in the Holocaust. Shortly before the war, a boy from the Land of Israel arrived in Łódź. He was matched with Hela and they got engaged. He then returned to



*My father's grave
in the Łódź Jewish cemetery*

Palestine to prepare for their wedding, but war started. Hela survived in the ghetto and concentration camps. One day, after the war ended, a soldier showed up. He was wearing British Army uniform and drove a Landrover. It was her fiancé! He related that one night he saw a falling star and made a wish that Hela would live. After the war, he went from camp to camp

and inquired about her, until he found her in a refugee camp in Italy. They got married and settled in Israel. She lives in Netanya today and we are still in touch.

A YEAR IN STAROGARD

When I was 12, I was sent to spend the summer vacation with my uncle and aunt in the town of Starogard. Mom's sister, Aunt Pessia, and her husband Hezkel lived in a large apartment with their four children – two boys and two girls – and their Polish maid. The eldest boy Heshek (Zvi) was the same age as my sister Topcze and his brother Bartek (Nathan) was my age. Uncle Hezkel had a thriving leather and shoes business. His clients – Jews, Poles and *Volksdeutsche* (Poles of German origin) – came from the entire region.

Starogard was a beautiful and clean town with many small gardens and lush parks. Very few Jews lived there, a total of 12 families. A Jew of German origin lived in an apartment right next to the synagogue and he held the triple post of cantor, *mohel* (circumciser), and *shohet* (slaughterer). The town also had an ancient Jewish

cemetery with some tombstones inscribed in German. The Starogard synagogue was a tall and fancy building, adorned with beautiful decorations, but was seldom filled with worshippers. Bartek, Heshek, and I used to ask that German Jew to open it for us as we loved to sing there because its acoustics were wonderful. Things like that made me happy. I was in seventh heaven.

The summer vacation ended, but since things did not get better at home, Mom and Aunt Pessia decided (they corresponded) that I should stay in Starogard for the year. I agreed. I could live well here and have fun.



*My beloved mother,
Frida Krotoshinski. RIP.
Died in the Łódź Ghetto, 1943*

When school year started, I went to school together with Nathan. We attended the same class and even sat together. We,

the only Jews in 10th grade, were like brothers. Nathan was a strong, blond, and blue-eyed boy. No one dared provoke him, or me – thanks to him. At school, everything was fine. The teachers treated us fairly and I don't remember any actual anti-Semitism. I quickly learned Christian prayers, which helped me greatly later, but our teacher absolved Nathan and me from religion classes and we would go out to the courtyard and play football.

That teacher, who also taught us music, soon discovered my singing talents and started taking me with him to higher classes where I sang to the students. I would stand beneath the cross and sing songs they did not know (from my old school at Górny Rynek) and my voice echoed in the classroom as they listened in utter silence.

Once we went on a school trip to Gdynia and arrived in a neighborhood on the bay named Hel. The teacher arranged for me to sing on radio. I was not aware that it was broadcast live, so I just stood there, surrounded by microphones, and sang my favorite tune – Sorrento. When I returned to Łódź, people who had a radio and heard me said I sang very well. Obviously, I was very

pleased. Most of my friends had pianos at home and they could play and sing. The same happened at my Aunt's: Heshek played the piano and the violin, and I sang with them and felt right at home.

On Sundays we would go out very early in the morning on bicycle trips around town. We were a cheery group of Jewish boys and girls. We called these trips *majówki*. We would ride through the forest to the next town, some thirty kilometers from Starogard, pick fruit along the way, stop to rest, eat and sing. Those were happy days.

My uncle's shop was on the town's main square from which a road led to Königsberg, Germany. Many Volksdeutsche lived in the area and when they traveled to Germany, they had to cross that square. Bartek and I used to ambush them there. There were always some travelers who did not know the way, so they stopped next to us and asked for help and directions. We would quickly climb on the step outside the driver's door and point a finger in the right direction. We received a zloty or two for our efforts, and immediately hit the pastry shop right above my uncle's store and bought *snokis* – wonderful yeast cakes. I could devour eight

or nine of those, one after the other, and no one would notice.

There were times I missed home, but kids always cry a little and then relax. By the end of the school year, I could no longer stand it. I had a good time at my uncle's, but I wanted home. My aunt talked to Mom and one day I bid them all farewell and returned to my family. Before I left, my uncle and aunt gave me 250 zloty – quite a lot of money – for my mother.

BACK HOME

I was very glad to be back with my mother, sisters and brother. My joy was shadowed by just one thing: My beloved Grandpa was no longer alive when I returned. When I was in Starogard, he went out for a walk one day, felt ill, stepped into the Jewish Mrs. Biderman's hat shop, sat on a chair, and died. He was around seventy. They told me that Aharon Levkovich, Mom's brother, came to the funeral and both wept bitterly in each other's arms. I went back to school, to the eleventh grade, and life was normal again.

Zelig Ligorsky, the brother of my friend David, opened a new and sparkling butcher's shop on our street, not far from our house. He and his wife sold non-kosher meat to the gentiles, but did not eat it themselves, of course. Meat was a rarity in our house, but even though she could get a significant discount,

Mom did not dare shop there. The entire neighborhood would gossip if she only set foot there.

Zelig would stop me now and then, shove a zloty or two into my pocket, and say: “Go to the movies with David,” or “Buy yourself a cookie.” He presently lives in the USA and is a wealthy property owner. A while ago, his daughter was invited to a Bat-Mitzvah party with some friends, and Zelig came with her to Israel. “I want to see Shayek,” he said.

My wife Irka and I received him in our home and were amazed: He was 91, but his mind was clear and sharp, he remembered everything, and his heart was



Irka, her mother, and brothers, Yosef & Ze'ev before the war

full of love for me. Before he said goodbye, he shoved a \$100 bill into my pocket, just like old times. I refused, but he insisted. We had a semi-struggle. He won.

In our backyard, there was a sunken shed that was occupied by a poor family – parents and their eight children. One of their daughters, Elka, was in my class. She never brought food to school. There was none. Her father was a tailor, but could not provide for his family. Mom helped them as best she could. We were only slightly better off than them, but no one knew.

Samuel Finkel was another friend from school. He was a devilishly-clever redhead who did not speak Yiddish, only Polish. He was the best student in my class. We shared a desk, became friends and started visiting each other. At first, he did not notice I had no father. I didn't tell him. His father had a doctorate in mathematics, but made a living working for a large fabric factory, Widzewska Manufaktura, that belonged to another Jew named Oskar Kon. Dr. Finkel was one of the top managers and had some four thousand people working under him.

Across the street from the factory stood a line of two-family cottages of the factory executives, including

one occupied by the Finkel family. Outside their gate there was a guard who stopped all unauthorized visitors. When I first went there, I was amazed. Everything was strange and exciting for me. The house door was opened by a servant who wore a white cap and apron. She led us to Samuel's mother. He kissed her on the cheek and I kissed the back of her hand because I saw him do that with my Mom. He introduced me to his parents and sister, Rene, who was two years older and already went to high school. We washed our hands and sat at the table. It was an ordinary weekday, but the table was set like on a holiday: a pure-white tablecloth, pretty dishes and clean, starched and ironed personal napkins. His parents asked us about school and studies, creating a calm and pleasant feeling around the table. After dinner, we went to Samuel's room. I remember he had a little radio, a record-player and a violin. In Rene's room, I saw a white grand piano. The two of them played, I sang, and we all had a great time.

I graduated from grammar school with quite good grades. Topcze, then sixteen, already worked in the Feitelovich brothers' textile factory, helping to support

the family. She learned how to artistically fix clothes that came off the production line with defects.

She earned thirty zloty a week, which was nice but not enough. Once she started working, Mom closed the shop and dedicated herself to the house and children.

Mom really wanted me to go to high school, but I knew that our economic situation would not allow that. I told Mom that I should better study to become a *meister* (master) weaver – a most respectable profession. The master's job was to supervise the weaving machines, keep them up and fix faults. The weaving itself was in the hands of non-Jews. Until then, Jews held only managerial posts and were not allowed to work in the production line even in Jewish-owned factories, but times have changed and Jews could now find jobs in production, including master weavers.

Mom gave Samuel a letter to his father, asking for a meeting. Samuel came back a week later with a positive reply and a date. Mom was invited to dinner in their house, where she related our situation. Dr. Finkel was very sorry to hear I was an orphan. He did not know that before Mom told him. He was also sorry to hear I could not go to high school, and promised to do

his best. Mom said she left the Finkels feeling good.

A week after that meeting, Samuel came to my house with a letter from his father and instruction: Next Monday, I should go to Widzewska Manufaktura, report to Mr. Majewsky, who is in an oral charge of factory assignments, and hand him the letter.

That meant that I now had a job in the big factory! I was very excited. I, a fourteen years-old boy, was about to work at Widzewska Manufaktura! I could not sleep all night, and there was only one thing on my mind: Will I succeed in that huge factory?

After considering what to wear for my first day, Mom and I decided I should wear the fair, double-breasted suit. It was clearly too much, as I could tell from being stared at all that day. First, I reported to Mr. Majewsky's office, near the factory gate. He wanted to see my birth certificate and grammar-school graduation certificate. Then he sent me for a physical examination and an eye test. The results were satisfactory and Majewsky wrote everything down in his fine handwriting, though he was missing a finger on his right hand. Nothing could stop me now. I was sent to the Weaving Department.

On my way there, some seven hundred meters away

from the office, I met a young Jewish man named Levitin, who was a firefighter. His father, Dr. Levitin, was conductor of the choir I sang in and performed with before I finished my studies. Later on, I learned that Levitin's sister was in close touch with Max Kon, son of the factory's owner, and probably got Levitin that prestigious job. Levitin was surprised to see me and even more so when he heard I was to work in the Weaving Department. As noted, it was still unusual. We chatted a while, and I went on my way.

The Weaving Department comprised several huge halls filled with busy laborers and amazingly noisy machines. I walked around the place for a very long time before I came across the honorable Meister Schultz, while everyone just stared at this skinny and confused boy, who was clearly Jewish and way overdressed. Meister Schultz was sitting in a glass-walled office, wearing blue overalls. I introduced myself and he looked me up and down slowly and then politely explained my job: I was to take an empty cart from one hall, push it to another hall, fill it with weaving thread rolls, return to "our" hall, and place the rolls inside the machines. I quickly learned my work

and started running between halls with my cart. The girls who worked in the second hall laughed at me at first, but they meant no harm and eventually everyone got used to seeing me there as one of them.

I worked like that every day for two years, from five AM to one PM. Mom would wake me up at four AM so that I have enough time to wash, get dressed, and drink some tea. She made me fine sausage sandwiches, and I would go out to the streetcar (*tram*) station in the dark. I had to take two trams, lines 10 and 11. After work, I told Mom everything I'd done in full detail, at her request. I distinctly remember the first time I brought home my salary. I placed my pay slip and twenty zloty on the table, and Mom hugged and kissed me without saying a word, tears in her eyes.

Several months later, Mr. Majewsky summoned me to say that I will have to attend evening classes as part of my meister's training. There was an evening school in our neighborhood, where I studied free of charge. Most of the students were Poles and Volksdeutsche, and there were only three Jews in my class – myself and twins who were the best students. We went there three or four times a week. When they gave us ham

sandwiches with drinking milk, everyone dined but the three of us didn't.

Once, a student made an anti-Semitic remark, so one of the twins said, loud and in perfect Polish: "I hope anarchy will not rule here." The teacher understood and hushed the outspoken student. Other than that episode, we were treated well and there was no anti-Semitism. In fact, I can't remember encountering any hostile anti-Jewish attitudes before the war started.

While at school, we had to attend P.V. classes that were actually paramilitary training. We marched, foot-drilled and learned how to shoot guns. There, I met Ephraim Orievich, a Jewish boy who also was an apprentice in the factory. He talked to me in Yiddish only. Once, during practice, I called him Frank so that the Poles around us would not get his Jewish name. Later, he waited for me outside – though it was a freezing winter evening – and said: "*Sevek, mein nomen iz Ephraim. Azoy hot mir meine Tate a numen geyben, un azoy ich di zolst mir rufen.*" (Sevek, my name is Efrayim. This is what my Dad named me, and this is how I want you to call me).

He was a proud Zionist who always kept a copy

of *De Heintinge Naves* (Today's News), a Yiddish newspaper, in his jacket pocket. He had a large family in Brisk, but was all alone in Łódź. I asked him over and Mom gladly welcomed him. He invited us to visit him in Brisk during the summer vacation and meet his family and friends, but it did not happen because of the war.

Our factory had a marching band. Dr. Finkel put in a word for me with the conductor, who was his friend, and I was accepted. I could not play an instrument, so they gave me a drum. I still remember all the marches we played there.

On 27 September, 1939, the German Army stored all of Poland in a Blitzkrieg war, and my career as an apprentice meister-weaver came to an end.

THE GERMANS ENTER ŁÓDŹ

The first signs that war was upon us appeared in our region when Polish Jews who became German citizens in the past were sent back to their homeland. The Germans expelled even families where only one parent was a former Polish citizen, claiming they were not really German nationals. The children of those families were nothing like us: They spoke German, were very polite, smartly dressed and donned hats with a feather while still very young.

I befriended one such boy, Manfred Stern. On the day that the Germans marched into Łódź, meeting no Polish Army resistance, the two of us and his sister Paula were in the northern part of town, watching them. Manfred was excited: “Look!” he said proudly, “Here come the Germans!” In truth, they seemed handsome

and impressive to me too, marching in perfect order. Somehow, the sights I was seeing did not connect to “war” in my mind. We knew Hitler was talking against the Jews and heard of *Kristallnacht*, but not much more. Of course, no one could guess what was coming – neither I nor cheering Manfred and Paula. I was sixteen when the war broke out.

Food shortage soon followed. We had to stand in line for hours just for a loaf of bread. I had an older sister, but I still felt like the head of my family. I would get up at four or five AM to stand in line. I remember how once, after standing there for two hours, glad that there were only five people ahead of me and I will soon get my bread, a big Volksdeutsche fellow pulled me out of the line, kicked me and yelled: “You dirty Jew! Get out of here.” I returned home without bread that day.

On other days, bread was all the food I could get. We starved.

Occasionally, I would visit the Finkels. The factory was shut and they kept to their home. I used to get in through a gap in their fence. They did not know how to obtain food and other products, so they gave me some money and I bought things for them on the black

market. Mrs. Finkel always cried and hugged me and thanked me warmly.

Aunt Pessia came from Starogard with her four children. A tiny apartment was just vacated in our building, so the five of them crowded in it. Her husband stayed behind to liquidate his businesses, but was liquidated himself in the end. Here is how it happened: Even before the German invasion, Volksdeutsche bullies used to come into his shop to collect protection money. He gave them a zloty, but that was not enough. They wanted more. Uncle gave them another zloty, and they would rush to the nearest bar and spent it on liquor. Auntie refused to give. “Raus!” she yelled and chased them away. When the Germans arrived, Volksdeutsche became kings. The Germans gave them jobs, power and pillaged property. One day, they confiscated everything Uncle had in his store. The Volksdeutsche who extorted him before hung a board on his chest, reading: “This Jew offered 100,000 marks for Hitler’s head.” They tied him with a rope, dragged him across the square forced him to dig a hole, shot him, and threw him in.

But that happened later.

Auntie brought plenty of money with her, mostly in

500-zloty bills, and lots of sardine cans that she shared with us. After a while, the Germans cancelled the 500-zloty bills. I remember how Auntie cried bitterly. She had no money now.

In the early days of the German occupation, a German soldier came to our house with a neighbor, a Volksdeutsche named Streibel. He used to be a kind man. We always said “Good day” to him when we met on the street and he responded politely. Now, the Germans just gave him our entire apartment building. “From now on, you pay this man, Frau Krotoshinski,” the German SS man said. When Mom argued that she had paid in advance for the next few months, he replied adamantly: “It does not matter. As of next month, you will pay Herr Streibel for the next three months again.”

Things became very hard. I stood in the bread line every day. Sometimes I stood with Heshek, Auntie’s son, who looked like a *sheigetz* (gentile). One day, Heshek left his family and fled to the Russian side. I never thought of running away. How could I? Leaving Mom and my siblings never crossed my mind. There were rumors of people who fled to Warsaw and crossed over to the Russians from there, but doing that with the

entire family seemed impossible to me. Mom seemed old, Topcze was a naïve girl, and the others were very small.

After Heshek fled, Aunt Pessia took her remaining three children and moved in with relatives in a small town named Pławno.

The Germans imposed curfew: No one was allowed on the streets after five PM; offenders were shot. During the day, German soldiers or Volksdeutsche would knock on doors and take people out for work, but not every day. I and many others were taken to clean the sewage in houses of Germans. We went like some scared herd, showing no resistance. Once, they took Topcze to work in the police station. She returned in a state of shock. They gave her a rag and ordered her to clean the offices. Several hours later, she asked a German soldier for a new rag, and he said: “Take off your panties and use them!” I don’t know exactly what happened there, but she came home crying bitterly.

One day, a German soldier and a Polish police officer knocked on our door: “Stinking Jew, get out!” I got out. Many Jews were already standing there. I joined the line. Across the street, behind a fence, a

Polish woman yelled and cursed us: “Your time has come. They will take care of you right proper!” and I remember thinking: Why are you so happy? Your Poland is occupied and so many were killed.



The German Army arrives. Sep. 8, 1939

They marched us some five kilometers. Someone was counting pace weakly: “one, two, three, four; left, right, left, right.” A German yelled at him: “Louder, you Jewish pig!” Who was that Jew? I asked. “The Rabbi of Pabianice,” someone told me. It sounded familiar. He came to Łódź from the small town of Pabianice when we still lived in Stary Rynek. They took me to see him

once, and he put his hand on my head and blessed me. I was a very small boy then, and all I remember is a tall and handsome man with a long, white and silk-soft beard.

We reached a school in another neighborhood. They broke us into groups and took us in. My group was ordered to collect benches from the upper floor and take them to the yard. Someone took pictures of the SS men and the Poles standing in two lines and beating us for fun.

We worked like that for two hours or more when suddenly a Jew fell to the ground with a bench on top of him. I stepped forward to help him when I realized it was the Rabbi of Pabianice, but an SS officer walked up to me, said "Leave him!" punched me in the eye and broke my nose. I bled a lot and of course my nose got swollen. "Get back to work!" the German yelled, and I did. I was very scared. As evening fell, it started raining. They told us to form a circle, and so we were surrounded by drunken Poles who were passing a bottle and laughing with joy.

The SS officer who hit me now ordered the rabbi and me to step out of the circle. He pushed the rabbi to

his knees and gave me a pair of large and rusty scissors. “Cut off his beard and *peyes!* (*sideburns*)”. How can I recount this? It was awful. My hand trembled terribly. I did not know what to do, how to act, and where God was. But the rabbi whispered to me: “*Sneid, sneid mein kind*” (cut, cut my son).

I ran home, afraid I might miss the curfew, and cried all the way. I could not stop regretting what I did to the rabbi. When I arrived home with my swollen eye and congealed blood, Mom screamed and the little ones started crying, but my tears have dried out. I could not tell them anything. At night, in bed, my soul found no rest with the image of the rabbi on his knees before me.

One night – someone was knocking. We panicked. Who could it be? It was curfew time. A voice behind the door said: “Open up. It is me, Heniek Jacobovich”. It was the son of our neighbors, a tall and fair boy who looked like a gentile. He was Topcze’s private tutor and apparently, they had an affair. He had fled to the Russian-controlled regions and now came back for her. He was a Communist. They caught him once, handing out leaflets on the street, and jailed him. After his

release, he showed me a diary he had written while in jail, in neat handwriting and green ink.

We had to make a quick decision. Mom was very impressed with his situation and asked Topcze, who was not yet eighteen, if she would go with him. She said yes. She had enough. Immediately we gathered a group of Jews and performed a wedding. We drank some home-made wine and tried to be as merry as possible. They left a few days later.

We heard nothing from them for some three years. In 1942, we learned that they arrived in Brisk and stayed with my friend Ephraim Orievich, went on from there, and crossed the border to the Russian zone. Ephraim was murdered later by Ukrainians. As soon as the young couple arrived in Russia, my brother in law was sent to the front. Topcze remained alone, pregnant, and then had a child. Barefoot and carrying a baby in her arms, she started asking around for help. A merciful bakery owner let her in and things improved for her. She worked in the bakery for food and shelter for her and the boy. In the end, Heniek came back from the front and the two got back together. Later on, they immigrated to the USA, where she lives to this day.

LIFE IN THE GHETTO

One day, they moved us out of the house, didn't let us take anything, and deported us to the ghetto. I remember how they marched us to Bałuty like it was yesterday. They gave us an empty room with nothing in it. We had to reequip. We had very little money and some jewelry. We found one thing there and stole another thing here, but heating was our biggest worry. We found a tiny heater of sorts and took it. Winter was very cold. I was sixteen, redhead Guta was fourteen, Haya'le was ten, and Shlamek was eight. It was 1940.

The head of the Ghetto was a Jew named Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski. Before the war, he was a lobbyist for orphanages and knew the richest and most important people of the community. The Germans found him when they entered the Jewish Community offices. He made a good impression and they made him *Judenälteste* (Chief Elder of the Jews).



Entering the Łódź Ghetto

The Łódź Ghetto was a city within a city. It had its own currency, “Rumkowski money” that carried his portrait and could be used only inside the Ghetto. We had factories, bakeries, a post office, the lot. Life was organized, as were the transports of Jews to Auschwitz. Following German demands, Rumkowski provided quotas of Jews while employing and caring for those left behind.

At first, we lived on whatever we “lifted.” People would bring products and vegetables to the various kitchens in the ghetto, but kept some on the side and later sold it on the ghetto’s black market. Visiting those

markets, I would lift a pumpkin here, a potato there, anything I could. I was head of the family now while Mom watched over the little ones at home.

After a while, I discovered there was a postal service in the ghetto. I liked the idea and wondered how I could get a job as mailman. I knew that everything that happens in the ghetto goes through Rumkowski, and I had an idea: I knew he used to care for “his” orphans, so I decided I’d introduce myself as an orphan who needs help. It was risky because if they caught me, I’d be sent out in the next transport, but it was also an excellent opportunity.



The Germans appointed Mordechai Haim Rumkowski as Chief Jewish Elder of the Łódź Ghetto

Knowing where the ghetto management was, I snuck in and told Rumkowski's secretary, Wolkovna: "I am a student of Rumkowski from the Helenuwek Orphanage. I want you to tell him there is a young man here, a fatherless orphan, who needs work. I have a mother and three little brothers at home." I knew things about that orphanage because when I was a child I used to play football with boys who lived there, some of whom even went to the same school with me.

Wolkovna went in to see Rumkowski and I waited outside, knee-deep in lies and trembling with fear. Rumkowski came out a few minutes later.

"What do you want?" he asked in Yiddish. "Mr. Director," I said very formally, "I was at Helenuwek when Neuhaus was principal." He gave me a piercing look. "What is your name?" Krotoshinski, I said. "Are you related to the rich Krotoshinskis I know?" We did have rich relatives in Łódź that Dad used to call every holiday, but we lost touch after his passing. Rumkowski must have collected funds from them for the orphanage. "I don't know. They are not my relatives," I lied brazenly.

Before he went back to his room, Rumkowski

turned to his secretary: “Wolkovna, sign him in.” She wrote down my specifics and told me: Go home. I will take care of it now.

A few days later, I received word that I got a job in the post office and should report to the director, Eng. Grabber. When I arrived, he asked who sent me. I said, “Rumkowski” and that was enough. I became Mailman No. 9.

Things were slightly better for my family and me now. I had a job and a salary that matched the number of my family members, and we were entitled to food rations. The postal service was perfectly organized and worked smoothly. The office had a kitchen that provided us with soup.

Other things in the ghetto, however, went from bad to worse. People died of dysentery or starvation. People who were taken to hospital never came back, and people who died in their beds were taken away in special death carts. People were dying in the streets too, but I ignored them. I pretended I did not see them, but you could not ignore the smells. People did not always report it when someone died in their homestead, so they could keep collecting their rations until the horrible

stench of death could not be ignored. Then, the death-cart people would show up, pull the body out and toss it into their cart like it was a rag.



September 1, 1942: Hospitals are emptied

I made my mail rounds. At the time, the Russians and the Germans, as well as the British and the French, still respected mutual post-delivery agreements. I had a mailman's cap that made me look official and warmly welcomed when visiting various houses. I used to bring packages, news and money. Some families were paid for relatives who were taken as forced laborers when the war started. I had a box of cash that I handed out as instructed. People who received packages always

kept something for me. Sometimes I brought letters to people who eagerly waited for some news about their children in Russia, but by the time the letters arrived, that child was no longer alive.

Rumkowski knew all of the rich Jews and collected funds from them for the ghetto. People who refused him were sent out in the following transport.



I as a mailman in the Łódź Ghetto (right)

That was his way to get rid of people, including criminals. Some were sent to Auschwitz, but “did well” there.

When Rumkowski himself was sent there near the end of the war, they had him executed.

The Łódź criminals assumed all kinds of roles. They stole and robbed, of course, but also helped people in their own way. They used to go into the large shop with a large stick in hand and make the proprietors “donate” for the wedding of a poor man’s daughter, for example. If anyone complained to them that his things were stolen, they tracked down the thieves and arranged an exchange: the original owners paid something and got their goods back. As a mailman, I often came across one of the underworld leaders. He always received me nicely and gave me a loaf of bread.

There was an orphanage in the ghetto for children aged six-sixteen, including some young people who were trained in farming ahead of their *aliyah* to Israel. Rumkowski looked after that orphanage and the children there always seemed happy and healthy. I used to deliver mail there too. I particularly remember three thirteen-years-old children who used to hug and

warmly kiss me whenever I brought them some news of their loved ones.

Once, on my way there, I saw from a distance that the Germans surrounded the orphanage. They told me to stay away so I could only watch from afar how they took the children out. Later we found that they were taken to the Hlemno death camp. Only thirty seven of the 1,800 children there survived.



One day, another mailman said: “Krotoshinski, I got something for you” and waved a postcard in my face. I snatched it from him and immediately identified Topcze’s handwriting. I ran home all excited. Mom was in bed. A wound she had on her leg became infested and we had no clean bandages or ointments to take care of it. This was how she contracted bone TB. Shlamek was simply a wondrous angel. He tore a strip of his only winter shirt and bandaged her leg. The house was cold as we had nothing to burn in the oven, but the postcard from Topcze warmed our hearts. She said she was in Russia and had a son she named Hilik, after our father, and that her

husband was in the frontline. We were very excited. She asked that we write her back and we did. One day, we received a package from her with some lard, rice and sugar – probably all she had. We did not touch it because we figured that if we sold its contents, we could buy some potatoes and cabbage. We thought that would be better.

Guta, who replaced Mom in running the house, put on a warm coat and went to the marketplace. It was winter and she wore wooden clogs. After she

sold the goods, she kept the money, went to the one of the ghetto kitchens, and bought some soup with our ration coupons. On her way home, she tripped and fell, spilled the soup, and lost the money. She barely made it home. Regretful and filled with remorse, she contracted meningitis. She withered away for ten days and in her final hour, as I held her in my arms, she whispered: "Sevek, visit my grave."

The death-cart people came to take our Guta. I asked the men not to throw my dear sister, so they placed her gently in the cart. Mom could not go to the cemetery. She was unable to walk by then. Haya'le was very emotional and cried endlessly, and Shlamek was silent and only held my hand tightly as if he were afraid I might leave him too. I did not want the little ones to come to the cemetery with me, fearing they would not be able to stand the sights, and so I walked alone behind the cart all the way to my sister's grave. They put up a small sign there: Gita'le, daughter of Eliash Krotoshinski RIP. Then I went home and we all cried. That was it.

At some point, international agreements were nullified and the post office no longer received mail

from outside the ghetto. Activity continued only for local mail – deportation notices and such. Rumkowski's secretary Wolkovna helped me again and found me another good job, in the kitchen that served the ghetto factories. The factories worked for the Germans, but kept some of the ghetto residents alive. I believe that was in 1943. I did everything there: Carried bags of groceries, moved huge soup boilers, arranged the storage rooms, or stood next to the person who handed out soup and collected people's coupons. When the person who approached the window was someone I wanted to have a double portion or more from the bottom, I would turn an empty pot upside down for the soup pourer to see. She knew what to do. Once I saw a woman wrapped in a shawl and I recognized my old teacher, Mrs. Amsterdam. Looking at her face, I could tell she was suffering. She said nothing, but her eyes were pleading. I signaled to the pourer to give her a double portion and she did. Mrs. Amsterdam said nothing. I could not do the same for my family, because everyone knew who they were, and if I were caught doing that for them, it would have been the end of us all.

One day, kitchen workers were ordered to report to the ghetto prison. Clearly it was an *akcia* (Polish for the German *aktion* – a deportation operation) ahead of a labor transport to God knows where. They issued a list and I was on it. I had to report. There was no other choice. If I didn't, they would have seized me by force eventually and denied my family their food rations.

I hurried there before the police officers came to find me and seize everything in our apartment. Mom was terrified. Shlamek and Haya'le cried as if their father was being taken away from them. The police shaved my head, gave me new pants and a white shirt, and put me in a cell with others.

Several days passed. I was depressed with worry for my family – my sick mother and two little siblings. What will they live on? There was no one to provide for them. One day, I peeked out the window that was covered with barbed-wire and suddenly saw Mom going to the prison. Haya'le was holding her hand and leading her. I yelled, "Mom!" and immediately felt a smack on my back. Someone pulled me down, a Jewish officer. He beat me bloody and said: "If you ever dare do that again, you'll end up badly."

Luckily, I was not sent to the camps that time. Here is how it happened: In our building, on our floor, lived mother and daughter. The family father was taken in one of the *akcias* and never returned. The daughter, Madzia, was a year younger than me. She was a wonderful, intelligent girl, always with a book in hand. She completed her matriculation exams in the ghetto. I used to visit her often and we spent hours together. It was a sort of an affair, but we kept proper distance. What is ordinary today was not acceptable then.

With time, I found out that Madzia saved me from deportation. She had a friend, Marysia, who worked in a shoe factory. Marysia was the secretary of Izbicki, the factory owner. He was well-connected with senior Nazi officers who used to order custom-made boots from him. Madzia begged Marysia to ask Izbicki to act for my release, threatening to commit suicide if I were not. Marysia told me about this later. She did as asked and it worked. One night, at around eleven PM, they woke me and marched me to the commander's office. When I entered, I found Izbicki and Marysia sitting there. She signaled to me that it will be fine. I was sent to a physician then, and he examined me and

determined that I had some lung-disease symptoms and therefore was unfit for transport. He signed the document, passed it on, and I was released. I rushed home and... what can I say? Hugs and kisses. Mom was besides herself with great joy. My brother and sister clung to me...

I too happened to save an entire family – parents and their two children. The Zamel family was our next door neighbors. The Germans used me and other mailmen to track down people slated for deportation, but I used to go there and warn them: “Hide! They’re coming.” The Jewish policemen would take people from their houses to the courtyard and the Germans sent whomever they wanted on transports. One day, our building was slated for deportation and they sent me to notify the families. I went to the Zamels and asked them not to come out. “Stay home and hide under your beds.” They had large blankets that concealed the bottom of their beds. They crawled there and I walked out and locked the door. When the Jewish police came, I told them I’d given the key to the SS officers, and I told the SS men that I’d given the key to the Jewish police. Mom and the little ones came down too, but when the Germans saw they were

my family – they had some respect for official position holders – they told me to take them back upstairs.

After the war, I met the Zamels in Givatayim, Israel, and they could not stop thanking me for saving them. Whenever their son saw me on the street, he would go, “Shayek, Shayek, Shayek...”

Several months after Guta died, Mom followed. Her wound became infested and she was taken to hospital and never returned. At first, when I went to see her there, I was encouraged. She was in bed with her leg properly bandaged, and she proudly told the woman lying in the next bed: “Look what a lovely son I have. See how he respects his mother.”

I used to sit with her and tell her about the little ones and what I did in the ghetto. Before I took my leave, she said: “Shayke’le, I beg of you not to leave the children. Do you hear me? Watch over them.” She knew she was dying, but I had no idea these were her final words. In fact, I was very pleased when I came home and told Haya’le and Shlamek that Mom was cared for and doing well. Two days later, I returned to hospital and could not find her. I asked a nurse, our neighbor Paula Goldblum, “Where is Mom?” and she

said, “My dear, I’m sorry to say that your mother is no longer alive.” I did not know what to do, who to ask why and what had happened.

The next day, they called us for her funeral on Brzezinka Street. First, I had to identify the body. She was stiff, had twisted arms and legs, all covered with ice. I recognized her by her hair. She was buried and we returned home. The little ones did not let me go: Sevek, Sevek. Madzia and her mother came to our place and cooked whatever they found. That’s it.

I tried hard to survive and sustain my family. Somehow, we managed to exist on the nothing we had. Our struggle for survival started anew every day. Time was running out. Once, I met the son of that rich Krotoshinski that Rumkowski had mentioned. We met by accident and talked. He offered no help, I asked for none, and we went our separate ways.

It is hard to describe the horrors of the ghetto. On top of starvation and diseases, there were human animals too: Volksdeutsche who spoke Yiddish and worked for the *Kripo* (*Kriminalpolizei*, the civilian police in the ghetto). Naturally, they were subjected to the Germans

and very dedicated to their jobs. The horrible crime they were trying to exterminate was possession of money and valuables. Woe to any Jew they picked! They used to speed around the ghetto in their carts and we had to run for our lives as fast as we could. We feared them. We feared each other. Jews used to rat on each other, and the Kripo sent their men to take Jews for questioning and had their own methods of finding where they hid their possessions. People emerged from these interrogations half-dead, if they came out at all.

We heard stories of women who gave birth in hospitals and the orderlies would throw the newborn babies out the windows for the Germans, who waited below and shot them.

I had a friend named Benek Eisenman who was my age. He was a true friend though we did not see each other very often. His father was Rumkowski's bodyguard, so they did not starve like the rest of us. People in high places who could afford it often adopted an orphan. Benek too had an adopted sister. One day, we met on the street. It was shortly before the final deportation from the ghetto. Benek pulled me aside and secretively said: "Sevek, on your handshake, this

never comes out of your mouth: I have my own bunker in the ghetto graveyard. It has everything – food and water. There is just enough room for one more person, and I chose you. My parents have their own bunker.” I was shocked by the offer, but immediately said: “First, thanks a lot, but I am going nowhere without my brother and sister.” He was sorry to hear that and said, “So I’ll be alone in the bunker until it is all over.”

AUSCHWITZ

Shortly after I turned down Benek's offer (he hid in the bunker and was saved), the Łódź ghetto mass deportation started. My siblings and I were among the last ones deported. It was near the end of August 1944. Earlier, I worked in the kitchen on the train platform where we gave the "travelers" some soup and a loaf of bread each.

It was hot on the platform – Madzia with her mother, and me holding Shlamek in one hand and Haya'le in the other. We boarded the train and grabbed a spot in the corner, near a window. Next to us were a mother and her two children. I knew the boy as Iżio. Seeing my devotion to my sister and brother, the mother asked me not to leave Iżio wherever we go. I promised I would. The trip was a nightmare. We traveled for two days, covering a distance that normally takes three hours. It was terribly crowded.

We could not breathe. There was nowhere to relieve ourselves. The trip just went on and on. At one point, Madzia whispered in my ear: “If we get through the war, come find me and we’ll be together,” and kissed me.



My good friend Iżio Erlich

The train stopped. I looked through the window and saw a conductor. I asked him in Polish, “Where are we?” and he said “Soon you will be fried.” I did not understand.

The train moved on and stopped after some ten more minutes. The car doors opened and people lashed at us, screaming and shoving. “Out! Quickly!” Who were they? I was amazed and could not tell what was happening. Later I found out these were Jewish “ushers,” collectively called commando Canada. I jumped off the train and then helped Haya’le and Shlemek down. One of the commando Canada men grabbed me: “Do you have gold, jewelry, anything? Take it out and give me now! The Germans will take it all anyway, and you no longer need things.”

It was bizarre. It was crazy. It was like some huge madhouse. Jews were screaming to high heaven, while an orchestra played merry marches, trying to overcome the noise. Across from us I saw a group of naked women, walking like some terrified herd with their heads shaven. Among them I saw Paula Goldblum, the nurse who cared for Mom. Suddenly Haya'le and Madzia were gone. They were taken elsewhere. I did not even have time to say goodbye. Not a word. They were here, and then they were gone. I held Shlamek's hand tight. Izio kept close. He did not leave my side ever since we jumped off the train. We were carried with the flow. Not too far from us we saw a large, tall and bellowing chimney. It seemed like the source of the odd smell, like fried fish. A German appeared before us and grabbed Shlamek. I did not let him. "I want to work with him," I begged, but the German sent him to the other side. That was the last time I saw my baby brother, the angel. I was left standing there. My mind went blank.

They ordered us to march in a line and guided us to the right, to the barrack. They took our clothes and gave us *pasiaki* (striped pajamas) and clogs instead of

our shoes. Then someone grabbed my arm and quickly tattooed a row of numbers on it: B8390. Iżio had a similar number. From there, we were taken to what they called the residential barrack.

It was a huge building that once served as stables for the Polish Cavalry. In the center of the barrack, standing on a covered through, was a Jewish capo. He received us with mean screams: "Take out your gold at once!" warning that if anyone is caught with valuables, they will be killed in front of everyone. I had Mom's earrings. I stepped out and put them there. The capo was beating people with a stick, ruthlessly and indiscriminately. I was hit too, on the back. Luckily it was not my head.

All of us, some two hundred people were shoved into one side of the barrack. The other half remained empty. They sat us in rows so that each of us spread his legs and another sat between them. Then we were ordered to sleep. It was terribly crowded and stinking.

In the morning, we were woken with beatings, kicks and curses: "Out! Count!" They did not call out our names, only the tattooed numbers. An SS man approached, ordering: "Academics, step out!" Several

people did and were taken away and vanished. Izio and I stuck together like we were glued. I did not even think of my dear siblings. I was confused and so hungry that I could only think of food. They gave us some soup, dirty water actually, once a day.

Two weeks passed. One day, a prisoner from another barrack, a veteran who has been in Auschwitz for the previous two years, went by our barrack. His pasiaki seemed tailor made. He looked well, and for some reason I caught his eye. He stared at me for a while and then approached and asked if I were hungry. He spoke Polish, but I did not understand what he wanted from me. When he repeated his question, I quickly said, “Yes, of course!” He then went to the cruel capo and told him he was taking me. He did not ask for permission. He just stated it. The capo agreed without a hitch.

We walked together for a few minutes until we arrived at a building that served as mess hall for SS men. He ordered me to wait in the corner and went in to set the tables. Then he came back to me with a pot of potatoes, bread, and butter. I charged at the pot and devoured the food. I could feel it entering every cell in my body. The man turned away so I would not feel

embarrassed. I said: "I have a cousin here. We both came from Łódź. May I take a bag of what is left to him?" The man said, "Eat up. I'll give you some for your cousin."

He gave me half a loaf of dark bread, some butter, and a sausage with lard, and I hid it all under my overcoat, which was too big and large for me. He then walked me back to my barrack, and handed me over to the capo. I went to Iżio and whispered in his ear: "I've got something for you; food."

Our capo has not touched me since. He even gave us blankets and sent Iżio and me to the empty side of the barrack. We felt a little bad for the prisoners on the other side, but what good could we do them anyway? We were finally warm and could sleep.

Two days later, that man came back for me again. This time, I asked for his name. I was determined to remember his name for as long as I lived. His name was Marek from the City of Kielce. Marek told me: "You remind me of my little brother. He is gone now. Do you see that chimney? They burn Jews there, hundreds every day; even children and women. They burned my baby brother there." Now I understood why he approached

me in the first place. I thought about my family and wondered if they had been burned too. Marek promised he will keep me fed while I was on camp, “but if you have half a chance, run away from here.”

Some two weeks later, a German in civil clothes arrived in the camp. He looked like some professor and asked for a group of “horses” for work. We were the horses. I remembered Marek’s advice and told Izio, “We’re joining this group.” We managed to get in line, where they checked each one of us. Those who were too skinny were sent back to the barracks. God knows what happened to them. The remaining eighteen people – all from the Łódź transport, including Izio and myself – got on a truck and left Auschwitz accompanied by SS officers.

The trip was short. We arrived at the Janina labor camp and went through the gate with the inscription “*Arbeit macht frei*” (Work liberates). The first thing we noticed was that the camp was clean and the prisoners wore clean clothes. There was another inscription: “One louse is your end.” It was a coal mine that needed laborers. Here, the Germans looked after them – at least when compared with Auschwitz.

First, they took us in the shower where cruel guards sprayed us with icy water from a hose while yelling, beating us and laughing at us. After the SS officers left, a capo came for a head count and more yelling, cursing and beating. His uniform was decorated with a green triangle, which meant he was a German criminal, serving his time in the camps. He and the other criminal capos were given special treatment, their pasiaki looked tailor-made, and they looked like ordinary bullies.

They divided us into two groups – day and night shifts – and sent us to the barracks. Iżio was assigned to the night shift. His barrack carried a sign: “Do not disturb; we’re sleeping here.” His group slept during the day, of course.

We had a count each morning at four thirty AM, after which we had to shower in cold water and stand in the food line. If you showed up unclean or untidy, you got a beating and no food. What passed as food? Some soup and a slice of rock-hard, dry bread. Then we went to work: Some three hundred and fifty prisoners in pasiaki and clogs, walking in the snow and singing on command. We sang German marches that I still

remember. At the mine entrance, they divided us into small groups and sent us to work.

It was very hard labor. From six thirty in the morning to five thirty afternoon we were at the mercy of a Polish capo who abused, cursed and beat us constantly, ruthlessly, with pure hatred. We were not allowed to talk or stop to rest, not even for one moment. My job was to load coal on rail carts. I had a very hard time. Before we were taken from the ghetto, I contracted pleuritis (inflammation of the lung membranes), but I was young and pulled through somehow. Now the disease came back and again I felt terrible pain in my chest cavity. It was intolerable. I cried and prayed to my Mom to help me, asking that a rock would fall on me and kill me.

Life on the Janina Camp was quite miserable and hard. People cracked. I remember a Jew who was a very quiet, religious man. One day, he just ran at the fence, wishing to be electrocuted to death. He was, but he did not die. The Germans finished him off. Others were flogged, sometimes to death. When a man was caught committing some felony, they tied him to a special wooden contraption, bent over, and hit him

with sticks on the back and his behind while we all watched.

September, October, and November 1944 went by.

One Sunday, our day of rest, I went to the lavatory, stood there and cried. I was twenty, and completely desperate. I wanted to die. A man with a shaven head and white apron entered and asked why I was crying. I told him that I could not take it anymore, that I was in constant pain, and that I knew I would not live much longer. I did not know who I was talking to and, quite frankly, finding someone who cared was quite rare in the camps. He asked if I came from Łódź and when he heard my name, asked if I were a relative of the rich Krotoshinskis from Łódź. I said I was, and he told me he worked as a wagoner for them. His name was Joel. "If that Krotoshinski arrived here," Joel said, "I could help him." I felt bold so I asked where he worked. It turned out he was in charge of the camp kitchen. There and then, he said: "come to the kitchen back door each day after work and you'll get soup and bread." I was shocked that anyone could actually help me and wanted to. I told him I was not sure I'd survive the work in the mine. "Do you have a profession?" He asked. I said I

was a weaving apprentice in a large factory before the war, and he said he'd try to get me out of the mine.

Naturally, I shared the extra food with Izio.

Once, a Volksdeutsche woman from the next village arrived in Janina. She asked the SS permission to give the prisoners a bag of potatoes. He agreed and took me with him to get it. That woman owned a butcher's shop in the village and gave us some meat to eat, a bag of potatoes and a sausage, and we returned to camp. Her son was a Communist. The Germans caught him and took him to some unknown place. I think that she felt duty-bound to help us out of sympathy. I tell this story just to show there were good people too.

The pain and a sense of stabbing in my ribs intensified, so I had no choice. I went to the clinic. There was a Jewish physician there named Dr. Orlik and another SS-appointed doctor who supervised him. Dr. Orlik tried hard to please his supervisor and treated his patients with outright cruelty. He used to hit them and cursed them in German. Also, there was a Jewish orderly from Prague who started kicking and slapping me as soon as he heard I was from Łódź. He must have been born from a mixed marriage where

only one parent was Jewish, but the Germans viewed such people as completely Jewish. “You are guilty of my mother’s death!” he yelled at me and kept beating. And who is guilty of the death of my mother, or my brothers?

Dr. Orlik decided I had to be hospitalized. I undressed and got into bed, which was already occupied as there was no room. My bedmate was a French physician named Dr. Levi, and we laid there head to toes. I could not sleep that night. I heard someone say that all of the clinic patients would be expelled from the camp. At dawn – it was still dark – Dr. Levi told me: “Get out of the clinic now and run to your barrack. Don’t let them find you here in the morning.”

I got dressed and off I went. Somehow, I managed to avoid the sentries and reached the barrack. When the sun came up, I sneaked around to watch the clinic and saw a small pickup truck parked outside. On the roof of the driver’s cabin were two gas cylinders and small pipes ran from them around the truck. The clinic door opened and exhausted patients were dragged out and thrown into the back of the truck, one on top of the other. They brought a few more prisoners who felt ill

so that a total of thirteen people were squeezed into a space for five. They drove away. Later I found out that the poor passengers were poisoned on the way to a pre-dug pit, where their bodies were thrown.

Once again, I was saved, this time thanks to Dr. Levi.

After that, I went back to work in the mine, but felt a sharp pain in my chest the very next day. I went to the clinic again. A Jewish dentist who examined me there stated that my teeth were “pretty as pearls.” I used to carry a small toothbrush hidden in my belt. The dentist took me to his room, gave me some bread with honey, and warned me not to return to the clinic. “There is only one way out of here,” he said.

Next chance I had, I spoke to Joel about my hard work in the mine. He asked if I knew anything about metalwork. “A little,” I said. “Things I picked here and there.” “Good,” he said. “If they ask you, say you know.”

Several days later, they called my number, B8390, during morning count. Everyone left and only I stayed behind. Joel came to me and said that the camp commander himself will meet me at the gate.

“He will ask a few questions. Don’t forget to answer affirmatively.”

I was scared. An hour later, they called me again. As always, someone yelled my number and it was passed on by people who shouted: “B8390, to the gate!” I went there. It was a tiny gate, wide enough for just one person. The camp commander was on the other side. Baumgartner was his name, if I remember correctly. He turned out to be a humane and civilized SS officer. He spoke to me respectfully, in third person, and asked if I knew anything about metalwork. I said that when I studied to be a weaver-meister, I learned some of that too. “Fine. Join the metalworkers group in half an hour and go to work with them!” I stood at attention and saluted him.

Half an hour later, I left the camp with some twenty men, all Jewish prisoners who arrived at Janina a year or more before me. I was happy when I realized we would be working outside, not in the mine, fixing coal carts. The group members were mad with me, firstly because I had no skills and slowed them down and secondly because I was given the job and not one of their relatives. Our supervising capo was named Hezkel, a Jew from Łódź.

He too hit us mercilessly and indiscriminately. He too did not understand how I got this job and was also mad at me. He hit me and threatened to send me back to the mine. I did not mind the beatings as much as I feared the hard work at the mine.

It went on like that for a month during which the group members' attitude toward me changed until they started being kind to me. They even taught me a few useful things. My chest pains were gone and I felt well, but I still feared the capo.

One day I met Joel and told him about the violent capo. He got really mad, took off his apron, gave it to me, said "Wait here!" and went off. I went to the bathroom to avoid being caught. Later I heard that Joel went to Hezkel's barrack, grabbed him by the throat, and said (in Yiddish): "If you touch this boy again, I'll have you transferred to the mine in his place. And don't ever come to me for extra food. I don't want to see you again, son of a bitch." Hezkel never bothered me again.

We did not work on Sunday, but we were not allowed to rest in bed. We could walk outside, however, and talk to people. I seized the opportunity and went to see how Iżio was doing. He did not complain and said nothing.

He was kind of silent. What a character! We had to attend cultural activities on Sunday. Those half-cast Jews organized our “cultural life.” Jews from France and Holland sang and a Hungarian Gypsy played. I did not sing and tried not to stand out. There were also boxing matches.

One of the capos, a German criminal with a killer’s face, always looked for prisoners to spar with him. He would not leave us alone and kept promising extra bread and soup to his prospective rivals. One of the Łódź Jews was a strong and muscular man named Wasserman, who had won a few championships. When that gentile teased us and asked for a rival, Wasserman kept silent and did not volunteer. One day, however, he could not resist the tempting bread and soup and said: “I am a boxer. I’ll fight you.” The capo was glad he had a rival.

A special stage was built the following Sunday and everyone in the camp – SS officers, mine directors and prisoners – sat around it. Even some girls from the nearby village came to watch, sitting outside the gate in special places made for them. I found a good spot for myself and for Iżio. We wanted to see the fight up

close. The criminal capo came out and the SS men and the girls received him with applause. Wasserman came out too and the first round started. He took a beating and the crowd cheered the capo. Later we found out that the two “practiced” before the fight. Wasserman kept pretending to be weak in the second round, taking punches. Iżio and I were shaking and prayed in our hearts: “Wasserman, get that cruel man.”

He came to his senses in the third round, pounded the gentile and knocked him down. The capo lost consciousness and Wasserman was declared the winner. We, the Jews, were very happy: A Jew beat a German criminal! I must say that even the SS men applauded the winner and the camp commander immediately transferred Wasserman to work in the kitchen. Wasserman helped other prisoners, slipping them more soup or another piece of bread. He once gave me some crust, and I enjoyed it.

On 17 January, 1945, they sent us out for a count at three AM. It was very cold, some 20 degrees below zero. Earlier, Iżio came to me after working the night shift and said they stopped working earlier than usual and when they returned to camp, their escorting officers

were very quiet and seemed confused. The camp commander approached us and said we were leaving this camp and going elsewhere, wishing us “freedom,” but no one knew what he was talking about.

That morning, we started our “death march” from Janina. We went to some unknown destination, wearing only our striped pajamas and clogs, without food or water, accompanied by SS men who were just as confused. We walked and walked for miles of freezing weather, hunger and despair. Many collapsed. The SS shot them and left them lying in the reddening snow. I remember watching a father and son walking together. The son tried to encourage his dad: “Just a little more. Hang on.” He pushed and helped him walk, but the father fell, the SS officer shot him, and the son walked on.

At some point, we spent the night in a brick factory. We all squeezed together against the freezing cold, so we could not even move. Right in front of my face there was – I hope my readers forgive me – a pile of shit, but I could not move my head away from it. If I got through this without being sick, I guess I can endure anything.

Finally, we arrived at a railway. They loaded us on cattle cars, to be taken to Germany for more hard labor. It is hard to describe what went on in the cars: Those who were stronger climbed all over the weaker ones, trampling them to death. I heard people crying “*Shma Israel*” and other exhausted Jews screaming horribly.

Iżio and Wasserman were in a car with me. For some reason, the Germans did not connect it to the train, which left the place. They pulled us out again, beating and kicking us, and we resumed marching in the snow.

The three of us were marching together when the boxing capo approached Wasserman. He extended his hand and Wasserman, though surprised, intended to shake his hand. The capo pulled out a knife and cut Wasserman’s right-hand wrist. He screamed in pain and fell to the snow, bleeding, dying. The capo fled. We kept on walking, oblivious.

We walked for many days. Only a few SS men remained with us. The officers all fled. We heard occasional shots fired and thought that the Germans were killing marchers again, but we were wrong: Those were Russians, drawing near. One of the SS men who walked with us was a handsome, dark-haired

man. I never understood what he was doing with the blonde SS officers. He approached me, whispered and asked me to write him a note saying he was OK and treated prisoners nicely in the concentration camp. I was indifferent. I wrote the note and he left.

We arrived at a forest. The Germans ordered us to run into the wood. It was not hard to guess what they were up to. Exhausted people ran in all directions, scattering like scared animals, alone or in groups. Everything was covered with snow. People fell. I did too. The Germans rounded us up at gunpoint and started shooting us. I heard people pleading, screaming to high heaven: Mercy! I hid beneath the corpses, covered by the wounded and dying. My pasiaki pajama was soaked with their blood. I heard an SS officer tell his friend: "Let's go. We're done with those."

I lied without moving until it was dark, got up, and started walking. I don't know if anyone else survived there. I did not look back and searched for no one. I could not help them anyway. I kept walking in utter darkness and knee-deep snow.

In the dark morning I emerged from the woods and saw light sparkling for a house window. I approached

it. It was covered with ice. I knocked on the window, praying in Polish, using words I'd learned in Starogard. I saw two blonde and pretty girls looking at me from inside. I begged them in Polish to let me in, crossed myself, and religiously repeated the prayers. I heard them arguing with their father. They wanted to let me in, but he was scared and refused. He knew that if they caught him harboring me, his house and property would be burned down and everyone there would be killed. The girls pleaded with him: Have mercy. He's a Pole. It is snowing. Finally, he agreed. I came in. It was warm inside – a burning fireplace, smells of home. I was overjoyed.

I introduced myself as a Polish man from camp – Stefan Stashek – and said that my father was an officer in the Polish Army. Dad and I were sent to the concentration camp, I said, and they just killed him. It was his blood on me. I did not mention Jews. The girls listened to me, crying and amazed. They introduced themselves as Maria and Lusha, aged seventeen and eighteen. There was an older boy there too. He returned from the frontline missing a leg.

Then they asked me to sit at the table and brought

homemade bread, lard and some tea. I will never forget the taste of that sweet tea. My expression must have revealed how I felt because they asked me if I wanted more. Of course, I did, but was too shy to ask. The girls brought in a pile of hot water, placed it in the corner, gave me a bar of soap, a towel, and some clothes – pants, a shirt, and a sweater. I could not believe this was really happening to me. It was warm and cozy, smelling of soap, of home. I was overwhelmed by feelings of absolute orphanhood. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I could not stop crying.

Clean and fed, I sat down to talk to the family. Time passed. Maria said that a German plain-clothes militia operated in the area. When I heard that, I said I'd rather sleep in the barn. I feared the Germans might find me and did not want them to punish the family for that. The girls made me a comfortable straw bed and brought in food and water. I felt in seventh heaven. The smell of manure and cattle was like excellent perfume to me. I felt I was born anew. I was twenty one years old.

Several days later, we heard shots nearby. Maria, the older girl, came to the barn and told me, "The Russians are here." Now I could join the girls in their home.

To be on the safe side, I did not go out of the house in the coming days. I asked the homeowner for a pen and some paper. I wanted to test myself and see if I still remembered things I'd learned before the war. I wrote down, in perfect handwriting, my name and address, and the names of my parents and other family members. I have not forgotten the lore of penmanship. Next, I wrote the multiplication table. I remembered it all. The father saw my handwriting and was very impressed.

A romance started between Maria and me. She fell in love with me, but I did not know what to do. Among us Jews, physical contact between boys and girls was taboo, and here it was all so free. I was too ashamed to cross the line. I feared I might offend the family honor.

One day, the father said to me: "Stashek, I know what you've been through, the hardships you endured. I have an offer: Why don't you marry Maria?" He promised he'd give us a piece of land and a part of his forest. I thought: I am a Jew. How can I marry a non-Jew?

One day, I went with Maria to bring water from the well. She kissed me and closed her eyes. I inhaled the

good smell of her body, but could not lie anymore. I told her that her father offered me to marry her, but I had to confess that I was a Jew and told her my real name. Maria did not know what a Jew was. I told her I was a member of the Mosaic faith, but she did not really understand the problem and suggested we get married in a small country church, not far from their home. “We could marry here and no one will ever know you are a Mosaic.”

This new situation was getting awkward. Finally, I decided to tell her that before we do anything, I have to find my mother in my hometown Łódź, and I will bring her back with me. Maria agreed, as did her father when I told him, and so one morning I left their house never to return. I wore my *pasiaki* over the clothes they gave me, shouldered a bag with some provisions for the road, they gave me their blessing and I left. Regrettably, I never wrote down their full names or address. I tried to find that family when I already lived in Israel, but failed.

I did not know how to get to Łódź. I just went in the general direction, taking main roads that were packed with Russian soldiers as their army rushed

towards Berlin. I thought that if they saw me wearing the *pasiaki*, the Russians would realize I survived the camps and sympathize. I was wrong. They did not care about anything and did not even bother to check before firing their guns. Dead bodies and burned tanks were scattered by the side of the roads, but the Russian tanks pressed on, indifferent.

I don't remember the circumstances that got me to Gliwice, but I carry a very bad memory from there. I knocked on a door and was invited into a house of a German family – parents, their daughter and her husband. The men were not sent to the frontline because they were essential train workers. Suddenly four armed Mongolian soldiers broke into the house. They dragged the daughter to the next room and raped her one by one. After they left, her husband hugged and kissed her.

I kept wandering. Occasionally, I'd ask the Russian soldiers for directions to Łódź, but they rarely understood my Polish. A Russian officer once asked me what I was doing around their tanks. I was scared at first, but then I told him that I was going to Łódź, that I survived the camps and, for some reason, that I

was a Jew. The officer stared at me and then mumbled in Yiddish, “Jews, merciful sons of merciful.” It turned out he was a Jew and his name was the same as mine – Shayek. Shayek Halperin. He said he was born and lives in Vilna, and I told him my story: childhood in Łódź, the ghetto, Mom, brothers and sisters, the horrors of Auschwitz, the hard labor in the mines. He hugged me and wept. Now that I think of him, I cry too, but I could not cry then.

He then summoned a female officer and ordered her to take me to his apartment in the military command compound, which was in a town some two-and-a-half hours’ drive away. He also gave me a note in Russian saying I could stay in his apartment until he gets there.

The female officer was Jewish too. Her father was director of the military hospital in that town. He treated me while I was there because my lips were full of blisters. On Shabbat eve, they invited me over. The father lit the candles, which moved me very much.

The Russian officer arrived three days later. He kissed and hugged me warmly, and asked me to join him on his trip to Berlin. “I promise I’ll kill every German we see on the way,” he said. I did not seek

vengeance. I did not care. He added, “Stay with me and when the war ends, we’ll rejoin my family in Russia together.” I thanked him, but declined. “I have to find my family,” I said, “if anyone survived.”

He understood, gave me some money, and wished me luck. I went back on the road. I walked a lot and sometimes caught a train, which is how I arrived in Łódź. It was filled with refugees wearing torn and dirty rags.

ŁÓDŹ AFTER THE WAR

I got off the train in my hometown on the 26th or 28th of January, 1945. No one waited for me. No one cared if I lived or died. I did not know where to go, where I'll stay, what I will do with my life.

I took the No. 11 tram to Górny Rynek, the ride that took me to work and back every day. It ran along the main street of Łódź, which seemed very busy. I went to my house. The concierge that lived there before the war was indifferent. "What? You survived?" she asked. That's how the Poles reacted in those days: "What? You came back? So many of you did?" Mom used to give that concierge a cake she'd baked on holidays, but she did not even ask me in for a cup of tea.

I asked about our apartment, and she said it was occupied by a couple now. The husband worked for the security services. I went upstairs and knocked on

the door, but there was no one there. From that moment and until I left Poland, I spent my days searching for relatives and acquaintances, safe places to sleep, and some source of income. Generally speaking, soon after I arrived in Łódź I decided I will live in the Land of Israel because I was a member of the *Hashomer Hatzair* youth movement, where they often mentioned Israel. The war was not over yet, and curfew regulations were still in effect. I could not just come and go at will.

The Jewish community in Łódź started organizing and making records. Jews who returned logged in with them. People who heard something about others gave testimonies, which were also registered. This is how I learned about the fate of others and they knew about me. Haya'le was not on the lists and, naturally, Shlamek was not either. I'd realized by then that he was taken straight to the gas chamber. Even Madzia was gone. I felt very lonely.

I spent all days, outside curfew hours, wandering the streets and looking for food and familiar faces. First, I met Romek Kalisky, who was a few years older than me and also survived the concentration camps. We walked around town together and when curfew time

drew near, I asked him not to leave me. “Don’t worry,” he promised. “You’ll sleep where I sleep.”

We went to a factory that his father managed before the war, and to their house, which was naturally occupied by Poles. Their former servant now owned a house near the factory entrance. He welcomed us and made sleeping arrangements for us. As usual, I could not sleep. Thoughts about my family troubled me constantly. It so happened that we had to separate two days later. Romek went his way and I kept urgently searching for a place to stay. If you were out at night, they shot you.

I went to visit the parents of Janush, a Pole friend who worked in the factory with me. He did not return from labor camp in Germany. We talked a little and the three of us were very sad. I asked if I could spend the night, and they offered me a bed, where I slept under a cross. I left their home the next day and they bade me a tearful farewell.

Then I met P’ on the street, an acquaintance from the ghetto. When I was a mailman in the ghetto, I sometimes brought him postcards from his sister in Russia. When he heard I had nowhere to stay, he immediately offered that I move in with him. He said

he spent most of his time searching for his wife and children all over Poland, so having me over would not bother him. He had a large and nicely furnished three room apartment on Sienkiewicza Street. My housing problem was resolved for now, but the Russian officer's money was running out.

In the same building on Sienkiewicza lived two women, one young and the other older. I used to see them through the window and became curious. One evening, I summoned some courage and went upstairs to their place. The sign on the door read, "Poles live here" – which was very common in those days. I knocked and the door opened slightly. Behind the safety chain I saw the older woman peeking at me. She had fair hair and looked Catholic. Behind her stood a gentle looking girl with big black eyes and two dark braids. "Excuse me," I said. "I am your neighbor and I have a terrible headache. Do you have some powder to ease the pain?" The older woman said, "Come in, please," and went to get the drug. I just stood there, waited, and exchanged smiles with the younger woman.

Naturally, it was just an excuse. I had no headache, but I had to swallow the drug anyway. We started

talking. It turned out that the girl, Krisha, was Jewish and Łódź-born like me, while Zossia was her Polish nanny since childhood. When the war started, Krisha's parents asked Zossia to look after their girl, and she took her to her house in Częstochowa. They hid there and in the neighboring villages. Krisha had rich parents. Before the war, they lived in a large villa in Łódź. Krisha knew that they buried money and other valuables in the ground before they were deported, but the Russian Army now occupied the house. I asked if they did not fear that Krisha's Jewish origin might be discovered and get them killed. They showed me some poison they kept for just such a case. They were ready.

A relationship developed between us. I visited them often and Krisha and I became very fond of each other. One Friday, Zossia was away for some reason, so I invited Krisha to dine with me at my place. I lit Sabbath candles and the young woman burst into tears, recalling her grandmother doing that in a white kerchief. She was flooded with memories from home after years in which Zossia tried to make her forget she was Jewish. I had no romantic interest in Krisha, but merely wanted to save her from Christianity. She told

me she had a family in Brazil and some cousins who served with the French Army. I was hoping to send her to them.

Zossia must have noticed something was happening with her protégé, who stopped crossing herself and said the prayers without passion. One day they just vanished. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. I decided to go look for them in Częstochowa. I went there by train, which was very crowded. I remember climbing on the roof and making the trip there. I hopped between cars as the train moved and ripped my trousers. An older woman who sat on the roof too kindly mended them for me at my request.

I arrived in Częstochowa and started looking. I remembered that Zossia had an apartment near a certain square, so I went there and started asking people if they'd seen an older blonde woman with a young dark girl. One woman did and pointed at their apartment. I knocked on the door, and again Zossia opened it, but only as much as the safety chain allowed. She was surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see a friend in Częstochowa and decided to see you while I am here," I replied without hesitation.

She let me in. Krisha was standing there, silent and pale. Zossia spoke sternly: “Sevek, if you don’t leave this town at once, I’ll have you taken directly from here to the cemetery.” I knew that the Polish nationalist underground, which was anti-Semitic, was still active. They murdered Jews. Zossia must have had some friends there. I tried to tell her that I was a friend and had no ill intentions, but Zossia was determined to drive me away from Krisha. I had no other choice. I left, but before I did, I slipped Krisha a note asking her to meet me at the train station. Krisha could not hide the note, so the two of them came to say goodbye. Zossia kept some distance from us, but never lost sight of Krisha. Then, the train came. I lost.

I met another friend from my Post Office days. Lotek Rosenfeld too went to hell and back. His face was all wounded and festering. He had nowhere to stay, so I invited him in. When my landlord returned from his trip and discovered Lotek, he was very angry, fearing the wounds might be contagious. My friend slowly recovered and things improved.

I did not stay with them long and found me another apartment that used to belong to a former Jewish

officer and a military physician who now worked at the Łódź hospital. The apartment was on the third floor, on 74 Piotrkowska Street, and stood vacant because that Pole actually lived in another town with his girlfriend. When he asked if I could watch over his place, I agreed at once and now I really lived alone.

I met Tolka Wilner, a nice and gentle girl who worked in the ghetto kitchen with me. She told me that her sister Hela survived Auschwitz and the two were searching for a place to stay. I let them in. The apartment had three rooms and another room with separate entrance. I let them sleep there. Hela was pregnant and went into labor one night. We went out even though it was curfew. I yelled and called for a policeman. An armed soldier arrived and we used sign language to explain what was happening. He understood and helped us. We took Hela to the hospital, where she delivered a healthy daughter. Tolka and I spent the night on a hospital bench. Years later, I met Hela and her daughter in Israel.

Sara, the wife of Zvi Shefler, was also pregnant when the two stayed with me. Zvi was organizing illegal aliyah. They were lucky enough to find another apartment before she had her baby.

The Jewish community gave me a small sum of money that was enough for nothing. Most of the time, I practically starved. Hunger kept me awake at night, I missed my family, I was very confused, and I found no purpose for my life in Łódź. I became depressed, not knowing what I was living for.

Still, one has to live, and I had all kinds of ideas. A man I knew lived in a village outside Łódź. He let me take potatoes that he had buried in a hole in the ground. I used to go there by train, dig out a few frozen potatoes, and cook them for myself at home.

In early January, 1945, the Bielsky twins knocked on my door. We met in the ghetto when they worked in the smithy and I in the kitchen where they ate. Whenever I could, I increased their portion. They were nice people, always smiling and never complaining. The community office gave them my address. They used to buy clothes, socks, and haberdashery items in the city and then traveled to towns and villages outside Łódź and sold the goods. They offered me to join them. When I said I had nothing to contribute, they said: "Don't worry. We'll help you." And I agreed.

We bought and sold and traveled to villages and

towns. Once I suggested we go to Krotoszyn. I knew that Dad had a family there and hoped I'd find someone. The three of us took the train.

Krotoszyn turned out to be a lovely town. We went to the main square and asked people if they'd heard of the Krotoshinskis. An elderly Pole told us he remembered they were wealthy, but knew nothing of their fate. City hall provided no details either.

In the meantime, we sold everything we had and were about to leave when a Pole asked us if we were Jews. He said there was a hospital nearby where several young, Jewish looking women were hospitalized. They did not speak any Polish, only Hungarian, and could we go there and help? We did.

Dr. Vishnevsky, the hospital manager, received us there as we introduced ourselves as agents for the Jewish community of Łódź who were looking for Jewish survivors. He was glad we came and told us that six young Jewish women were on the first floor, suffering from frozen feet. They were getting a little better and he had to release them and other patients. "I was ordered to make room for wounded Russian Army soldiers," he explained.

We went up the stairs and entered a large ward. The six young women in their clean beds would not talk to us. They seemed scared. I exposed my arm to show them my tattooed number. "I am a Jew," I said in German. One of the girls silently translated my words, but her friends would not cooperate. I saw that nothing else worked, so I started chanting, "*Shma Israel, Adonoy Eloykeynu...*" and the girls burst into tears. We broke the ice.

The translator was Agnes Klein, Agi for short. She said they hailed from Hungary and Transylvania, were taken to Auschwitz and managed to escape their guards during the Death March. They hid in the woods, but their feet froze very quickly and if they had not been picked up by Russian soldiers, they would probably die. They did not even know where they were.

It was Friday. I went to a nearby shop and bought four candles. We lit them and sang in Yiddish and Hebrew. The girls were overjoyed. They were certain they were the only Jews left in the world.

Before returning to Łódź, we found a Polish farmer, paid him handsomely and made him swear that he would visit the young women daily and bring

them fresh bread, butter, and sour cream. We parted promising we'd be back.

A week later, the three of us traveled for business again and went to Krotoszyn to see the girls. As we crossed the square, a local resident warned us that members of the nationalist Polish resistance are around and might harass us. We parted so that each of us arrived in the hospital alone.

The hospital director was very happy to see us because he had to kick the women out on that same day. "The Russians are coming. I have no choice," he apologized. We carried three girls on our shoulders, took them as far as we could, went back for the other three, and so we did until we reached the train station. Our troubles did not end there. Until the train came, we had to protect the girls from Russian soldiers who made advances at them. We begged them to leave us alone, explaining the girls were wounded. Eventually, they did.

Arriving in Łódź, we hired two carts and brought the six to my house. We carried them on our backs, one by one, to the third floor. I gave one of them my bed and slept on the floor.

Slowly, they recovered. First to heal was Agi, who

was 18 years old, Gypsy-brown, slender and beautiful. One day I took her to the fancy Halka restaurant on the ground floor of my building. The Jewish community handed out restaurant coupons and luckily for us, Halka accepted them. It was a full and fine meal. Agi noticed a piano standing there and asked if she could play. I translated her request to the owner, and he gladly agreed. She played some Hungarian songs and bits of classical music. I asked her to play Sorento, my favorite song, and she played it beautifully. Next I asked for Gloomy Sunday and popular opera pieces. The patrons applauded and hugged her excitedly. We dined together a few more times.

The twins brought products and the girls cooked, gained strength and slowly began to walk.

The war ended two weeks later. People danced and rejoiced in the streets, drank vodka, hugged and kissed each other. I was very sad. The sad truth was always on my mind: Sevek, you are alone in this world. I hoped Topcze was alive, but where was she? The Poles were filled with anti-Semitism. They were sorry Hitler did not finish us all off and were mad at the Jews who “returned like rats.”

The girls registered with the Jewish community by their country of origin. The Red Cross received the lists and passed them on, and soon their families contacted them and they returned to Hungary. It was an emotional farewell. The twins and I cried, we hugged, but were glad we lived to see the day. They gave us their addresses and I kept Agi's very well: Budapest, Rakospalota von Klein – a large bread bakery.

I was alone once more. One night, Polish goyim in uniforms broke into my house, demanded money, and yelled: "Dirty Jew, give us everything you are hiding at once!" I begged and showed them the number of my arm. "I don't even have food to eat," I pleaded, but they kept cursing, kicking, spitting. Finally, they left, not before they damaged my furniture searching for valuables. I asked myself, why do I stay here?

Soon after that, I was left without a dime. Luckily, I met Ižio and he invited me to move in with him, which made me very happy and I did. Now we were a gang. More boys and girls joined. We had fun. We were young men and women, but we kept respectable distance. To this day, whenever I meet Wanda Fulman (Rane), she jokingly says: See that guy? We slept together. Wanda

got married in the ghetto, but her husband was sent to a different concentration camp. When we lived with Iżio, we received word that he was alive! We were informed of his whereabouts and we all drove there on a cold and rainy night. They met and everyone was very excited. They started living together again. Today, they live in Haifa; Wanda is a physician and her husband is a Technion professor.

LEAVING POLAND

The Polish Army started drafting young men on the streets. One day, Iżio and I were caught and sent to a military camp not far from Łódź. While we were having our physical, a Polish officer approached us, asking that we speak outside. “What business do you have with the Polish Army?” he asked. We had no answer. He then related that he had been to Palestine during the war. “I saw your boys there; excellent men! You should go there.” He gave us a pass out of camp and we took off.

The next day, we took the train to Kraków and left Poland. Romek Kalisky came with us too. In Kraków, we met Zvi Shefler who put us on a British Army car and sent us to the Czech border. We arrived in Szczecin, a small border town under Russian control. We had no papers to show them, so we said we were Hungarian.

The Russians did not speak the language, but neither did we. Just for show, we spoke Hebrew in an Ashkenazi accent: “*Boruch Atu Adoysheym Meylekh Haoylam...*”

A Russian officer heard us as he walked by. He stopped and asked us in Hebrew: “Where are you going?” I did not understand, but Iżio, who learned Hebrew in school, told me in Polish: “Sevek, this man speaks Hebrew!” The officer went on, in Yiddish this time: “I am a Jew like you.” He helped us cross the border into Czechoslovakia, and so we left Poland – thank God!

After staying a while in Preshov, Slovakia, we arrived in Miskolc, Hungary. At the train station, we saw a young man with a Star of David necklace. He asked about our destination. “We’re going to Budapest on our way to Israel,” we said. He suggested that we stay in Miskolc for a while because they were organizing a group to escape together. We were not convinced. We wanted to go to Budapest. I mean, if we’re already traveling, why miss the big city?

A band of Gypsies was playing at the station. They played so sweetly. I could not take my eyes off them. Iżio grabbed my arm. “The train is leaving. Come on.”

We got in the car. In the corner we saw a Jewish-looking woman. We sang and chanted in Yiddish, and her eyes sparkled. She asked where we were headed, told us a little about herself, and asked if we would like to spend the night in her place in Budapest. We accepted and spent the Sabbath with her. She fed us and cared for us with the warmth and dedication of a mother.

On Sunday, we bid her goodbye and went to the Jewish community offices. The three women who were sitting there were very elegant and all dressed up. Clearly they did not experience our kind of suffering. We had to answer a few questions and then were sent to a school that the Joint had converted into a refugee shelter.

I looked for Agi by the address she gave me, in a suburb outside Budapest. I found her parents' bakery. The woman who lived there told me that Agi's family did not return from the camps and she moved in with her aunt in Budapest. She gave me her new address.

I returned to Budapest and eventually found the house, which was an old and very pretty, four story building. I knocked and introduced myself to her aunt. I sensed slight apprehension when I said I was from Poland. Hungarian Jews never did like Polish Jews.

Agi was not there. I thanked the aunt, gave her my address, and asked her to tell Agi that Sevek was in town and would love to see her.

Soon Agi arrived, with her nephew. She became very pretty and looked wonderful, all dressed up and smoking a cigarette. When she saw me, she burst into tears and hugged me. Excitedly, she told her nephew everything I had done for her. “How will I thank him, I don’t know,” she said.

I went to her aunt with them and this time, she treated me differently, asked us to sit at the table, and served an excellent dinner that included some fine wine. Her son thanked me for everything I did for Agi and suggested that I stay in Budapest. “I have a good position working for the city,” he said. “I can get you a job.” When I said I was with Iżio and would not leave him, he said he could get a job for Iżio too. I politely declined and said I was headed for the Land of Israel. “Palestine is a dangerous place,” he argued. “I don’t think you should go there now.” I thanked him, but stated that I was determined to go. He was sorry to hear that, but accepted. I bid them farewell and walked out. Agi showed me out and then walked

with me a while. When we crossed a small park, she gave me a golden watch. “It was my father’s,” she said. “He never returned from the camps. Please, take it.” She pulled out some more valuables from her bag and offered them to me. I shook her hand, but insisted that I did not need them. She tried again to convince me to stay. “Look at how you live in that school.” I insisted and we parted ways.

While in Budapest, we spent much time at the *Hashomer Hatzair* club with local young Jews. We liked it there. I met a Jewish girl named Judith, or Juditka. She was short and pretty. We went to the amusement park together and kissed on the rollercoaster. Our affair did not last because she lived in Budapest while I was in a hurry to go. We were sorry to part ways. Years later, I heard she lived in the USA. We met. It was nice.

Iżio and I went on to Salzburg, Austria. Later, after spending time in various places, we arrived at the Camerchiefling Camp. By then, Iżio had a girlfriend – Hadassah from Łódź. I met her first and introduced her to Iżio. They fell in love and eventually got married. On camp, they were given an apartment while I was given a room.

The camp was alive with artistic and social activities. There was a blind storyteller named Shamay Rosenblum, a Yiddish actor from Łódź, and many more. We had dance parties and an amateurs' theater.

I was busy all day, met new and interesting people, and began enjoying my life. I slept better at night and no longer constantly mourned the loved ones I lost.

Once, walking in a forest, I saw a woman resting on an easy chair. I approached her and we started talking. She warned me not to come too close. "I have TB." It was Ruth Nakrits whom everyone called Rutke. Before the war, she was a nurse and married to a doctor whom she lost. She was 25, a beauty with green eyes and flaming cheeks. We became very close right from the start, met often and had long conversations. I truly fell in love with her, and I was not the only one.

We moved from Camerschieffing to Badgastein, a famous resort town where the world's greatest actors used to vacation. We took the bus there, and I sat up front with Rutke. We arrived at a beautiful mountain region, adorned with splendid hotels. I was given a flat at the Elisabeth Hoff Hotel.



*In Bad Gastein, Austria, on our way to Israel after the war
(I, center back; Irka, bottom right)*

When I got off the bus there, I saw a young woman that seemed familiar, and then I remembered we worked in the Łódź ghetto post office together. “Irka Radoshitsky?” I asked, and she said, “Yes, and you are Sevek.” This exchange went no further because at the time I was “spoken for” Rutke and did not pay much attention to Irka.

We had an active and thriving social life in Badgastein as well. There was a newspaper in Yiddish, and various hobby groups including a theatre. We had dance parties almost every night. There even was a kindergarten.

One day, Rutke's brother, the very rich Max Factor, arrived there to take his sister to a sanatorium in Germany. Rutke cried. She did not want us to part. Max said, "If Sevek wants to come too, there is room for him," but I did not want to go, though parting with Rutke was hard for me too. I saw them off at the Salzburg train station. She was hospitalized and later moved to Sweden, where she died.

After Rutke left, Irka and I became close. She was a nice, pretty and modest girl that many boys courted and wanted. Many of them were better educated than me, but she chose me over them. That was fate. One day, Irka brought me a letter from Budapest, from Juditka. She wrote: "Come. I am waiting for you." I did not even answer. My heart belonged to Irka.

While at Badgastein, I learned of the bitter end of Hayale and my friend Madzia. Shamay Rosenblum was married to a woman from Łódź before the war. He could not find her after the war and remarried. His new

wife's pregnancy was very advanced, so he went with her to hospital to be there for the delivery. His first wife, who survived and was now looking for him, arrived in Badgastein around the same time, and we became friends. When I asked about her scar, she said that she'd tell me later, but she had news about Hayale and Madzia. "We were near Danzig when the war ended. Seeing they were going to lose, the Germans just loaded ships with prisoners, sent them out to sea and torched them. If the fire did not kill you, you drowned. Several women were saved by local villages who came to our rescue, like me, but Hayale and Madzia were not among them."

By then, I knew Topcze was alive. We even corresponded. Now I realized that my older sister was all the family I had left.

Also at Badgastein I befriended a couple of vacationers. He was a Polish baron from Lvov, fifty years old and handsome, and she was a young German beauty who hailed from the Mendelsohn family of musicians. They invited me to dine with them at their splendid hotel on several occasions. They were very interested in my wartime stories, and I related everything I could about the horrors, agony and

humiliation. They listened closely and silently. The woman often cried, hugged me or caressed my arm. He would pour me some water and ask me to calm down. It seemed they became very attached to me, so one day they had a suggestion: "Come live with us and we'll do everything we can for you." They promised they'd take me on trips around the world and hire tutors to teach me everything I'd missed in school, vowing I'll never miss anything again. I told them I was planning to marry Irka. They said: "Why hurry? You are still young. Come with us. See the world. Learn." Their emotional offer moved me. They were kind to me like loving parents. None of that, however, altered my plans. The closer I became with Irka, the less I saw that couple. Before we left, I called to say goodbye. They were sorry to hear I was leaving and asked if I needed some help or money. I needed money, but said no and thanked them.

The entire Badgastein camp moved out at night. We went to the Antwerp Port in Belgium where we were supposed to board a ship and sail to Israel. The British found out about the plan, so we had to turn back and wait in Enghien, a town outside of Brussels. The local

authorities arranged a place for us in a local school, and we started running a kibbutz-like life.

Iżio did not come with us to Belgium. He stayed in Austria with Hadassah. Later, they moved to Paris, got married, settled down and had a son and a daughter there. Hadassah completed her doctorate thesis about the Holocaust in the Sorbonne. She collapsed mentally while writing it, until at some point Iżio could no longer live with her. He moved to the USA and still lives there today. Hadassah remained in Paris. He supported her financially over the years. We meet occasionally and talk on the phone.



With Irka in Belgium before our wedding

Irka and I got married in Enghien. We got some money from the Joint and even had a relative present – Irka's Uncle Lipel, who survived too, remained a religious man and performed the wedding ceremony. It was very moving and later our kibbutz friends organized a nice party for us, but our hearts were filled with sorrow for our beloved, our dead and missing relatives who did not attend.

At some point, we got tired of the Austrian kibbutz life. We had no new departure date, so we left the group and rented an apartment in town. Irka started working as a seamstress in a local factory while I looked for odd jobs. After a while, we received word from Enghien that they were readying to sail to Palestine again. We returned there and soon left for France with our meager belongings. We arrived secretly in a small port town where we were met by members of the *Mossad LeAliyah Bet* (Institution for Immigration B). They ordered us to leave our belongings and quickly board the *Theodor Herzl*.

On the ship there was too little room for too many people, including babies and old folks. Irka was heavily pregnant. She just lay in her bunk, ate nearly

nothing, and kept throwing up for the entire two weeks voyage. I cannot explain how we made it, except for the fact that we were young and eager to reach the Land of Israel. We all had our share of difficulties in ghettos and camps, but this time we had an exciting destination. We knew that if we wanted to reach Israel, this was our only option.



April 1944. Immigrant ship Theodor Hertzl. Marseille. Passover

Addressing everyone on deck, the ship commanders told us that if the British discover us and board the ship, we should pelt them with food cans. I kept running between the deck and below to bring Irka some water

and something to eat. The captain was Mordechai (Moka) Limon, a handsome man who walked around donning a sombrero and wearing high red shoes. Later, he became commander of the Israeli Navy and served as head of the Israeli Defense Ministry delegation in Western Europe during the Cherbourg affair. I knew I'd never forget this beautiful man and indeed, in 1999, my wife and I met him and his wife at a Yiddish theater show at Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) House. I walked up to him and reminded him how, when the ship tilted, he used to say: "*Ale mentchen yvegein of de zveite zayt!* (Yiddish: Everyone move to the other side!)." He told me then that there were drinking water tanks on one side of the ship, which is why it tilted in the first place. He was very moved by that meeting and his wife warmly hugged Irka.

We arrived in Haifa two weeks later. The sight of the Carmel Ridge made us all very excited. It is hard to describe what we felt and thought. I mean, the entire voyage was impossible and dangerous, with so many people – men, women, and children – all jammed into one ship. Our joy, however, did not last long. The British found us and, using bullhorns, told us that we may not

enter without a permit from her Royal Highness the Queen. We shouted back that we had nowhere else to go. “Let us in,” we yelled. “No!” was the answer. Immediately we started wildly dancing the hora and chanting: “Who are we? Israel!”

The British soldiers were unimpressed. They quickly surrounded the ship. We threw cans at them as told and even wounded several soldiers, but they were unmoved. They fired a few rounds at us and killed three men I knew. If these heroic stories are not taught in history classes, it makes me very sorry.

The British sensed we were weakening and seized the ship. A few hours later, we were taken off the *Theodor Herzl*, sprayed with DDT, given a blanket each and boarded a ship whose deck was enclosed with barbed wire. One of the British officers seemed like a gentle person to me, so I asked him to let Irka and me stay in Israel given her condition. He apologized, but refused. Before we boarded that other ship, I saw another British officer whose lips were wounded and bloody, probably from a can we threw at them. I asked if he would be so kind as to deliver a letter to Rachel Steinberg, my wife’s aunt who lived in Israel since

1937 and was her only relative. He gave me a pen and I wrote that we are being deported to Cyprus. He took down her address and she received the letter. I greatly appreciate what he did.

CYPRUS

The Great War ended, but not for us. We were fighting a different great war for our lives and sanity. The prison ship left the harbor and sailed to Cyprus. We were hurt and disappointed.

Landing in Cyprus, we were immediately taken to a camp – tents and tin shacks, surrounded by empty sand dunes and British soldiers who pointed their guns at us. Irka and I shared a tent with another couple. We had no privacy, the food was awful and a strong wind was blowing all day, making everything fly.

Irka was due in early September. When her contractions started, I called a soldier, who called an ambulance, and they took us to hospital. We arrived at the very last moment, as labor started in the car. The hospital staffers took good care of Irka and the delivery went well. They told me I had a daughter and let me

look at her. Truth is that I got quite scared. I could not understand why she looked like that. I mean, Irka and I were not ugly. The baby weighed 2.1 kg.

I went back to camp and gave the news to Uncle Lipel, consulting him on a name for the newborn. He asked for Mom's name, translated it to Hebrew, and stated: Aliza. I did not have a penny to buy Irka a flower or some gift. I was allowed to visit them three days later. Irka asked that they show me the baby. I could not believe it was my daughter.

On the way back, I talked to a woman who also returned from hospital to camp. "Wait a few more days," she said. "You will not recognize her." She was right.

Three days later I returned there and saw that my daughter would be a beautiful girl. I was not wrong.

When Irka came back from hospital, we moved to a tin hut that we shared with Aharon and Tusha Wotkowsky who were also expecting. A blanket hanging from a thin wire separated us. Aliza cried day and night and we worried that we were disturbing our neighbors. One night, I even covered her mouth with my hand to stop her crying. That's how desperate and inexperienced I was.



Sep. 1947, at the detention camp in Cyprus with Aliza and Irka

At some point, they established a daycare center for babies on camp. It was under the supervision of a pediatrician they sent from Israel – Dr. Felk, a tall and heavyset man who always wore high rubber boots. He ran the center sternly and patronizingly, and treated the young parents with utter disregard and meanness. He never smiled, gave no good advice, nor cheered us up, and we so badly needed some encouragement and a kind word. We were allowed to feed the children three times a day for one allocated hour. Parents who were late for their turn were not allowed in and just sat outside frustrated while their baby inside was

screaming with hunger. The doctor warned us: “If such a thing happens again, you’ll take your child and never bring it back here.” The cruel physician did not care about the hell we’d been through.

The parents took turns watching the babies at night and the shift included changing all of their diapers. This was the happiest time of my life. Their smell was like perfume for me. The baby in the cot next to Aliza will grow up to be a famous singer, Mike Brandt

Dr. Felk decided that the babies should be “vaccinated” against the hot weather in Israel and ordered us to take their cribs out to the sun. It was terrible. Their skin turned red, they were dehydrated and some even died. We did not dare disobey him at first, but called him Dr. Mengele among ourselves. Eventually, we took Aliza out of the daycare center and back to our hut, despite its tough conditions.

These conditions reminded us of the concentration camps: fifteen people were given a piece of black meat and some rice and flour. We had visitors from Israel – representative of various political parties, each trying to recruit members. Debates and fighting soon followed.

We marched on May Day and the Revisionists

attacked us. We exchanged punches and blows. Several American boys, who came to help sail our immigrant ship and were detained with us, did not understand what was going on. They were attacked too. I was so ashamed.

Golda (Meir) Meirson came to visit us, representing the UJA. She promised that in Israel, we will hold a shovel in one hand and a gun in the other. She was followed by the amazing singer Shoshana Damari, who stunned us all with her unique voice and Yemenite singing style.

A group of babies' parents sent a petition to Queen Elizabeth II, asking her to let us enter Palestine outside the British quota due to our family status. The queen accepted, provided that the husbands stay behind. The women refused, we sent a second petition, and the queen consented. We left Cyprus in yet another barbed-wire prison ship. We were lucky to leave. Some of the people who stayed behind in Cyprus were brought there long before me, and some remained there even two years after we left.

It has been fifty four years since, but I still remember how deeply worried we were about the sail to Israel.

Irka lost eighteen kilos since we arrived in Cyprus and had Aliza. We had empty pockets and no promises or handouts from anyone other than Golda's festive declarations. I could not imagine how we'd make do in our fathers' land, which was a completely strange place for us.

IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

When we disembarked, I knelt and kissed the ground. We were all very excited. Finally, we were “a free nation...”

A special bus with a driver in green uniform and a peaked cap took us from the port. We set in the front row, to his right, and watched him with amazement: A Jewish bus driver! He never looked at us or said a word, not even “Welcome.” They took us to *Beit Ha'Olim* (Immigrants' House) in Ra'anana. Arabs fired at us along the way. Kindergarten children awaited us there, singing and waving little blue-white flags in a heartwarming reception. It was good to feel they were glad we came.

Somehow, we started hoping we would manage: We were healthy and in one piece in our country, had a healthy baby, and even a tent all of our own. Even the

howls of hyenas, that emerged every night from the orchards around our encampment, which were pretty scary, did not dampen our optimism. We were given fruits for Aliza – bananas, apples, sometimes oranges – and tasty food from the central kitchen. I still remember our first Sabbath eve. All of us sat around long tables, laden with food, singing songs of the land. It was good to feel human again after all that we've been through.

The locals, however, showed no interest in us. Their indifference hurt me. I did not get it. To them, we were inferior people. Next to the immigrants' encampment, was a small, unpainted house. Its owner came out when I took Aliza for a walk in her stroller. How I wanted him to ask me in for tea, just once. He saw us there every day, but did nothing and never said a word. Why? I have no answer.

Once, while strolling with Aliza through the nearby grove, its owner, Adam Stern, a German Jew, asked me about his brethren who were deported to Poland before the war. I told him they were the first to go.

Another time, riding a bus, I lifted my arm to grab the handle and my tattooed number appeared. People around me turned away, not to look at it. I have since

avoided the top handles and kept the number hidden. Some Holocaust survivors had it surgically removed.

We wanted to settle in the Krayot suburbs, north of Haifa, where Irka had some relatives, but they would not let us go there. I guess this was because we were registered as member of *HaShomer HaTzair* while the man who supervised us was a veteran *Mapainik*. Only after I made it clear to him that our political differences mean nothing to me did he let us move. They sent us to an immigrants' house where Irka and Aliza were given one apartment and I was given another. I started working in construction, but I did not speak Hebrew so well yet. Other than the understandable hardships, I encountered the harsh attitude of my Jewish contractor. One day he sent me to bring some "two-by-fours," speaking in Hebrew. I did not know what that meant and since I'd heard him speak Yiddish with his partner, I asked in Yiddish what he meant. He merely repeated "two-by-fours" and would not answer, even though he knew. That was the kind of antagonism against us, the survivor immigrants. In the end, another laborer named Mizrahi pointed at a pile of planks and helped me move them.

One day, I met a man I did not know and we started a

conversation. He told me he was recruiting volunteers for the Haganah (pre-IDF military). Would you like to join? He asked. I said I would. I'd heard about the Haganah before. "Do you speak Hebrew?" he asked. When I said I did not, he suggested I'd wait a while. "I also see you have a little girl." I replied that I'd be proud to join that organization. He gave me a note and sent me somewhere. I was sworn in and sent to the Kiryat Haim beach, where I shared a building with a few other men. My job was to watch over an arms cache that was buried in the sand. I have this mental picture of myself guarding the cache. it was raining, and I daydreamed about my sister Topcze, sorry that she was not there with me. I recalled my other departed family members and cried. Then I kissed the soil and thanked God I was in Israel.

Later, I joined the army. At the Haifa recruitment center, I met David Weissberg, an acquaintance from Poland who had served as an officer with the Polish Army. I remembered I met him in Łódź after the war and I was very impressed: an officer, uniforms, a small pistol, an intelligent man. We talked next to a group of people who were speaking among themselves in

Yiddish seasoned with Hebrew. Suddenly a man we did not know approach and asked if we would join him in something. “I need eight men,” he said. “You have two already,” I said, “and I think some of the guys over there would love to join too.”

He collected our documents, made some arrangements, and drove us in two cars to the Australian Army camp at Kiryat Motzkin. Each of us was assigned some maintenance duty. I was placed in charge of the power generator. That man was Shubinsky – the future first Israeli carmaker and a rich industrialist. He gave me fifteen pounds from his pocket and told me that was for a cantina I should manage that would sell sweets and haberdashery, and gave me a list of suppliers to contact. I followed his orders and opened a small cantina. The two contractors who had abused me with the beams business were among my clients. I took my revenge and sold them outdated cakes.

After a while, the army opened its own *Shekem* cantina there and mine was closed. I went to Shubinsky to give him what was in the cash register: thirty five pounds. I took nothing from the profits because I just got paid. “Krotoshinski,” he said, “keep the money.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It is yours.” His surprising answer was: “I have enough. You need it.” It was unexpected and I felt the need to give him back at least what he invested, but he insisted: “You have a little girl. You are a young couple. Take it!” Eventually, we found a compromise: I gave him back ten pounds and kept the rest.

When the War of Independence started, Shubinsky came to me and said: “Krotoshinski, I don’t want you to fight. You’ve been through enough.

I suggest you join the police.” I reminded him that my Hebrew was quite inadequate, but said I trusted him and would do whatever he said.

We drove to the Haifa Port, where he introduced me to the local station commander. I stood at attention, just like I learned in my youth, and answered his questions. When he asked about relatives in Israel, I said my wife had a relative who was a senior official with the Postal Authority in Haifa. That pleased him and he enrolled me. Before we parted, Shubinsky said: “My office is in downtown Haifa. If you ever need anything, I will help.” He was a kind man who was warm and considerate to me.



*A Jewish police officer
in his homeland*

I started working as a guard at the port, and after a while went to the fledgling police academy in Tel Mond. During the course, I made great efforts to muster the language. It was very hard, but I had a wife and a little daughter, and I had to do everything I could to provide.

After I graduated, I was assigned to the Yagur station and put on a uniform. I liked that. The tiny station was under the command of an officer named Brown, who imposed British-like discipline. I learned Hebrew in motion, while working. There were no *ulpan*s back then.

Once, they brought in a Jewish prisoner. I was not used to seeing Jewish criminals. They told us not to speak to him. Not even a word. The minute I was alone with him, I asked why he was detained. “I am a *LEHI*

member.” I did not know what that was. “Does your family know where you are?” He was not sure. I could not help myself. I took his address and, acting against my instructions, I went to see his wife and told her where her husband was.

A while later, Brown told me: “Kroto (that’s how they called me in the Police), we are opening a new station in Akko. It will suit you better there.” I moved.

The Akko station was larger than Yagur’s. Life was easier there. I no longer went on patrol as the sergeant gave me a desk job, where I issued all kinds of certificates for people. I befriended the sergeant who was kind to me. He always shared the sandwich he brought from home. He would cut it in half and say, “Come, Kroto; help yourself.”

By then, I spoke Hebrew and even knew how to read and write. We found a big nice house near the Old City of Akko, where the Arabs lived. We had another son, Avi, who was born in Haifa. Aliza went to kindergarten and was just like any Israeli child. We established some ties with veteran Sabras (Slang. Native Israelis). They visited us, we visited them, and we would sing and play the accordion and balalaika. Things were looking up.

I was promoted to sergeant and then sent to sergeants' course. It was hard and in Hebrew, and I had to make great efforts just to understand and learn. I was very tense. All of that affected me negatively. I became depressed and flooded with painful memories from the ghetto and camps. I even had suicidal thoughts. I told no one, not even my wife. We had small children and I had to get over this.

One man at the course, Shaul Levi, who spoke even French and English like a genius, helped me quite a lot. Later, he had a fine career, became commander of the Jerusalem District and later commander of the Prisons Service. Shaul helped me with the Hebrew, clarified things for me and encouraged me. I taught him a polish proverb that roughly says: "Don't touch that pile of shit; it stinks." He got it and would repeat it in perfect Polish accent. Occasionally, when he saw I was struggling, he would toss me that saying, to make me laugh. He helped there too.

I graduated the course with reasonable grades. At the graduation ball, I was in a better mood and quite loose. I danced with the wife of the course commander. His deputy, Dani Rozolio, who will later become police

chief, was amused. He brought a large picture from his office, wrote “For Kroto the Criminal” on it, and had the other officers sign it. I still have it somewhere.



*Akko 1950. With my friends: Shmuel Nadav,
Abu-Nimer and Avigdor Rosenberg*

I returned to the station and joined the investigators. I was aided by an Arab sergeant named Zidan Nimer. He worked for the police under the British, but when the War of Independence started, he fled to Lebanon with his family. After the State of Israel was established, he was recalled and reinstated as police sergeant in Akko. He coached and taught me important and interesting things

such as the differences between Druze, Circassians and Arabs, and the order and structure of the Arab society. I learned a lot from him and had a good time. For a while, I served as station sergeant in [the Arab towns of] Shefaram and Majdal Kurum. I used to ride horses with the police cavalry and joined all sorts of operations.

Unlike me, Irka did not like Akko. Not far from our house stood a Crusaders' fortress that served as a mental institution. They kept women there who survived the Holocaust but lost their minds. They used to scream to high heaven. It was intolerable. Irka was mostly troubled by the fact that the house we occupied was "abandoned property." She was uncomfortable about living in a house that was owned by Arab refugees, even though it was large and beautiful. Since my salary was quite small, we rented a room to a young member of Kibbutz Kefar Masarik, Yitzhak Keidar. Irka was also apprehensive about the neighboring Arabs and indeed, one day, while she was sitting inside with Aliza in her arms, a bullet was fired into the house. Miraculously, they were not hurt. This was a problem for me. How could I quit my job? I filed for a transfer to central Israel.



*My sister with her 1st husband,
Heniek. Belgium*

Irka had relatives in Jaffa who later moved to Givatayim. When they heard we were considering relocating to the center, they asked about an apartment for us. We had just received the first installment of German reparations, so we could afford an apartment.

While the police commanders delayed their answer to my request, Irka took the children and moved to Givatayim. We sold the Akko house to a large family of immigrants from Morocco with whom we shared it

until our Givatayim apartment was ready. Relocation was hard on the children. Aliza went to school by then and her teacher was our friend. Avi went to kindergarten. I stayed alone in Akko and slept at a friends' house. After a while, I was sent for an interview with the Tel Aviv District chief. I had ulcers at the time and wore my belt loosely to avoid the pain. The chief noticed that at once. "I see you are ill," he said. I told him I suffer occasional pains, but that did not stop me from performing my duties perfectly. "We'll see," he said and sent me back to Akko. He did not even offer me a chair during the interview.

Returning to Akko, I realized that my transfer might take a long time, so I decided to use my connections with a senior officer at the National HQ. He once asked me to take his relatives from abroad on a tour of Akko, and when he thanked me for my efforts, he said I may call him if I needed anything. He called the right people and arranged my transfer to the Police Economic Division in Tel Aviv.

Yet, things were not that simple. I was reunited with my family and lived in my own home, but I knew nothing about my new job. Until then, I studied, worked

and gained experience in investigations, but now it was all useless. Still, it was not all bleak. As part of my new job, I arranged vacations for the policemen, so friends would visit me and chat. It was nice.

I worked there for several years, but came under great pressure and some things did not work out the way I expected. This took its toll and in 1964, I had a heart attack while at work. I spent three weeks in hospital, luckily recovered, and could go back to work, but found that my position at the Economic Division had been taken. I was assigned an easier job and when I had the chance, I opted for early retirement at the age of 51.



My sister Topcze (Terry Jacoby) during a visit of Israel

*With Avi and Aliza
in Givatayim*



Aliza, aged 12



*On our balcony
in Givatayim*



On the Tel Aviv beach



*Purim ball in Givatayim
in the merry 1960s;
Irka, Alex Bartal, and myself*

I found a job as a buyer for Telestar-Kedem, an electric appliances company. It was a whole new world for me, but I received help and guidance. The company treated me wonderfully, but things went wrong there too. When color TVs arrived on the market, a company subdivision that produced TV sets was left with a large stock of black & white TV sets, which dragged down the entire company. It was closed and again I had to look for a new job. I was fifty three.

This time, I found a job at a Bank Leumi branch in Tel Aviv. I kept in touch with clients, examined their options and gave them services. Three years later, a layoff wave hit the older workers first, so I had to go. I could have stayed and fought for my job, but I just had an open-heart surgery and did not have enough energy for that.

I worked for a while at a shop that sold radio tapes and car accessories, but quit it too.

I kept busy all the years since. I am socially active and my life has meaning. I am very pleased with my children. Aliza is chief editor with Yedioth Aharonoth Books and Avi is a senior engineer. Both built excellent families and gave us six wonderful grandchildren. I

know we did everything we could to make their lives better than ours, and succeeded.

We made aliyah to Israel fifty four years ago today, but we knew no peace with our Arab neighbors ever since. We were certain that here, in Palestine, Israel, we will be able to live our lives as do the residents of all democratic states. Regrettably, every day demands some needless victims. Who knows if our grandchildren would live in peace and quiet with our neighbors?

And so my story ends, but is not complete. I still have much to tell.

* * *

VISITING AMERICA



*With my nephew,
Harry Jacoby*



*Visiting my sister Terry and
her husband Lewis*



May 1980, visiting Avi



At Aliza's with Yuval, Itamar, and Yoni

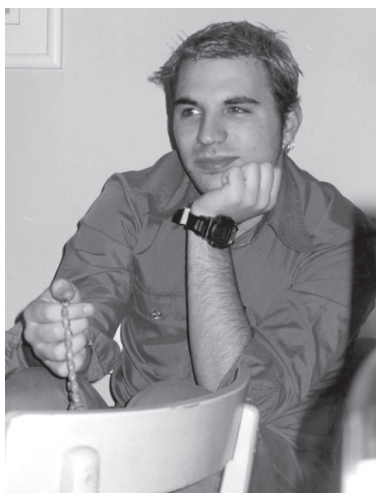


*Aliza and Reuven
at Efrat's bat mitzvah,
kefar vradim, 1989*



*Itamar sailing
the Ziegler's family boat*

Yoni



Yuval



Avi, 1989



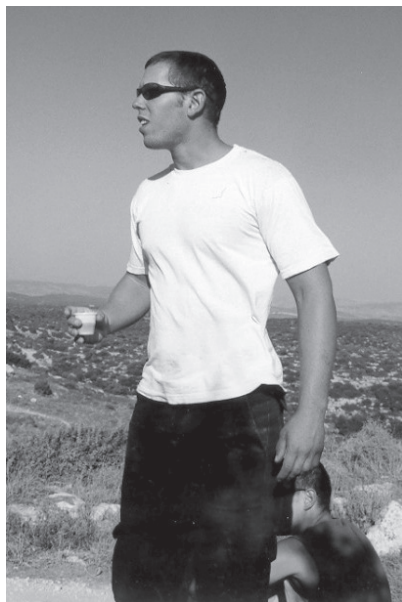
Michal



Nir's Bar Mitzvah, August 1993, Jerusalem



Roy



Nir



Efrat



*With Irka at Aliza's, with grandchildren Yuval, Itamar,
Yoni, Efrat, and Nir*



Michal and Efrat



Aliza and Yuval

* * *

Aba, you were born in Poland and made a long and hard way. You lost your father when you were 3, and WWII broke out when you were a teenager. You lost your mother, brother and sisters. Only one sister survived. You were in the camps and managed to pull yourself out of that hell with never ending will power and the survival skills you developed as a child.

When the war ended, you were twenty two and had to start everything anew. You worked hard and collected your pennies. You and Mom came to Israel the hard way, and managed to rebuild your lives, started a family, and later helped us as best you could.

Today, we are here to bid you farewell – Mom, Aliza, Michal, Reuven, Yuval, Itamar, Yoni, Efrat, Nir, Roi and me. Also present here are your relatives and friends from the ghetto and other times, people you met and uniquely befriended on the street and in cafés, in Israel and abroad. Despite age differences, they all became your close friends. For them, you embodied joy of life and a sense of humor. For some you were a good friend. For others, you were like a father.

You were hospitalized six weeks ago. I was sure

you'd overcome this, as you always do, get discharged and keep on with your life: traveling abroad, meeting friends, looking after Mom.

You struggled hard for six weeks, but your last struggle failed. Yesterday you gave up, which you never did before. As a farewell gift, you left us your amazing life story that you completed just a few days ago.

Rest in peace and don't worry – we'll look after Mom and everything you cared for.

Avi's eulogy, 18 December, 2001

EPILOGUE

My father had faults, of course, but his virtues were far greater. He was good hearted to a rare extent. I remember him running around endlessly to “fix” all kinds of things for all types of people – some close, most of them almost strangers. During his *Shiva*, dozens of people said, “He helped me so much.”

Dad loved to employ his excellent singing voice and mainly loved people. He had plenty of friends, which he made easily. He met people in Tel Aviv’s cafés and on beaches, establishing real ties with people from all around the world: Maya from Switzerland, who came as a girl to volunteer after the Six Days War and fell in love with Israel. Dad brought her home to Mom, and they became closest friends. They hosted her mother and even her neighbors from Switzerland. Of course, they stayed at her place numerous times. There was

also Renata from Austria, whose family was theirs too – her first and second husband, son, daughter and mother. They visited Israel almost every year, and my parents visited them annually at Munze by the lake (Dad loved nature. and Europe). There was Willy from Germany and Tzipi, his Israeli wife, who became part of our family. There were the Dutch and the Germans, the senior police officer and his judge son with his family, the young reporter and his family, and Rosa from Switzerland, and Helga from Vienna, and Annie from New York – a story of friendship and correspondence that lasted 30 years, until she died of old age – and many others I don't know. Orange crates were sent to Europe each year. Blessings were sent here, and of course there were anxious calls during wars – “Perhaps you should come over until things calm down...”

And there were so many Israeli friends he met at Café Mersend in Tel Aviv. They included young people such as Israel Treister, who was like a son to him, and contemporaries who enjoyed his company as he had his daily cup of coffee, and spent a few pleasant hours together.

We will always remember you like that: Young, handsome and energetic, full of humor and love for mankind till the very last moment. This is our comfort: He did not want to grow old, and indeed he didn't.

Aliza



This is the story of Sevek, a boy who was 15 when World War II broke out and the Nazis occupied Poland; of his incredible survival in the Holocaust and his no less extraordinary annals thereafter, immigrating to Israel and establishing a life and a family there.

Sevek finished writing his life story only weeks before he passed away, he did not live to see it published as a book.

I was Born in Lodz is published in his honor

"I look at the photographs of Sevek's grandchildren and think to myself that the transition from what the author-grandfather describes (Lodz, Auschwitz, Cyprus, Israel) to these children is inconceivable; perhaps this is what explains some of the madness and contradictions of our People [...] After all the humiliations, cruelty and death - this man remained such a life-loving, generous man."

David Grossman

"Lodz is not just a city on the map of Poland but a fertile and painful center in the life of the Jewish people. We are lucky to have such a heart-rending expression of what would otherwise have remained unknown and silent."

Shimon Peres

"This is a wonderful memoir, impressive in its content and in the way it is narrated. It must appear in many other languages."

Elie Wiesel

"Personally, I am weary of 'literary' accounts of Holocaust experiences. In its simplicity, this book won me over."

Yoram Kaniuk